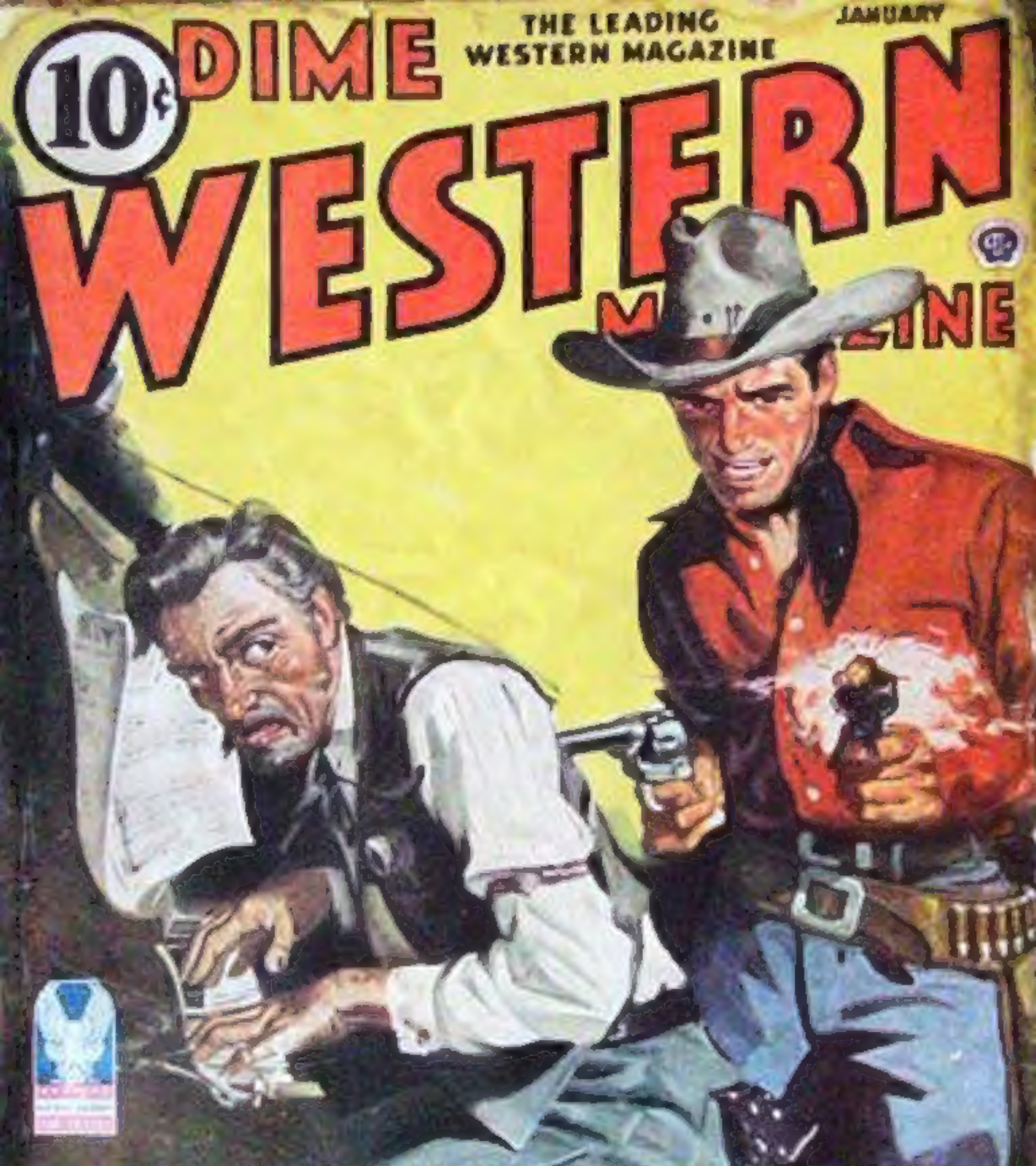
10¢

DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

THE LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE

JANUARY



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LAND RUSH! by TOM ROAN

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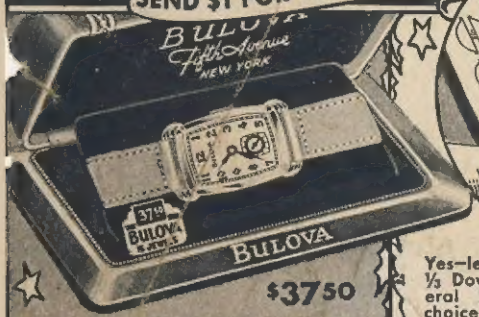

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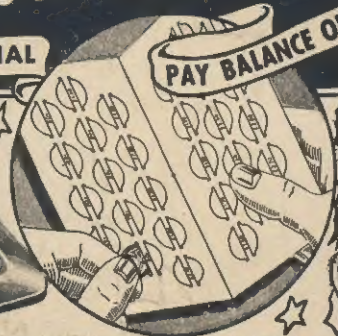

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THE WORLD'S LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY ISSUE PUBLISHED DECEMBER 30th!

VOLUME XXXV | January, 1943 | NUMBER 1

Complete Western Novel

Christmas at Mormon Basin.....Walt Coburn 11
Too proud to ask his neighbors for their sorely-needed help, too brave to buckle under the killing drought that wrecked the most stalwart ranchers, Dally Parker, shoved his herd into Mormon Basin—and dared a hundred Bronco-Mormon guns to stop him!

Three Western Novelettes

Land Rush!.....Tom Roan 44
Bullet-shattered veteran of one Lost Cause war, old Joe Lee and his family found they must fight still another—the bitter struggle of the Cherokee Strip Stampede—before they might regain the land they'd already paid for in blood and tears. . . .

Long Guns and Scalp Knives.....William R. Cox 70
The long-ago echoes of a girl's scornful laughter sent half-pint Ben Palmer into the green hell of the wilderness, to bring—with scalp-knife, rifle, and bare fists—the fear of God and buckskin men into the savage Ohio frontier!

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Neither his famous pistols nor his devout piety, it seemed, could save Friar Robusto, Six-Shooter Saint of the Sierras, when he sought Don Feliz's daughter in the lawless Caves of the Owls country!

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Could that desperate night of lashing wind and roaring flame prove the true caliber of Joey's manhood . . . ?

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Only spitting brasada bullets could help Mitch decide between his loyalty to his long-lost friend—and his love of the ranch girl they both wanted. . . .

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Cass Spicer hoped that the Red River would halt those Texas gunmen, who once told him that dead men tell no tales!

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A friendly get-together with one of our top-string writing men.

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General Alfred Sully won his spurs in the Civil War—and, with saber and carbine, won also the wild Dakota frontier for honest settlers. . . .

ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS!

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IN THE SADDLE

DID you ever finish a story that seemed, somehow, to leave the printed page and become—for the moment, at least—a real adventure that you'd actually experienced; with the characters real people whom you knew from having ridden the same trails, shared the same camp-fire, the same grub, the same dangers? And when you did finish reading a story like that, did you ever wonder what sort of gent the author was? Would he, for instance, be a man who'd stick when the going got tough . . . would he be that rare kind who'd meet trouble with a grin and say, "Come on, pal, let's fight 'er through and together, and do a real job!" Or would he . . .

All right! We don't like masters-of-ceremony, either—ever since we had to listen to some hairpin in a boiled shirt pull that "A man than whom—" business. So we'll just let William R. Cox, whose colorful dramatic stories of early pioneer days we've been running for some months, speak for himself:

Maybe because my family took me to a ranch near San José, back in 1904, and it never got out of my blood. Maybe because my only brother (hiya, Ray!) is an adopted son of New Mexico, and cusses me out considerable if I make any errors in description of locale, and generously asks me each time he writes to come on out there with him. Maybe that's what makes this frontier business important to me—important enough to write stories about it, that is.

Or maybe it's because the West is a thing that gets into your blood, sending you to book after book in library after library. I own a few. A hundred or so, selected out of a thousand.

I'd be in Texas now if it weren't for the latest little fracas Uncle Sam has to clean up, when he gets rolling good. I'm a little old for it—and too soft by far—but I got to stick around and help with little things like taxes and morale and whatever sort of a ham-strung middle-aged guy can do. Then I'll go—and quick—to that M. B. Lamar library at Austin. And to listen to the great J. Frank Dobie, whose books are such a tremendous help to delvers into western history. . . .

Meantime, we try to deal with factors which went to the making of the great frontier empire. The people, incredibly tough and brave, and with that strange, salty, native humor brought from the seaboard where their pioneer ancestors first displayed those great characteristics in another war in '76. . . .

Me, I'm just a mug. Nobody wants to hear about me. I've been a lot of things, none of them interesting, except maybe the newspaper work here and there and just enough radio experience to make me leap and start yapping at sight of a mike. I stay in Florida because that's the thing to do right now to conserve rubber and stuff, and to stick on the job.

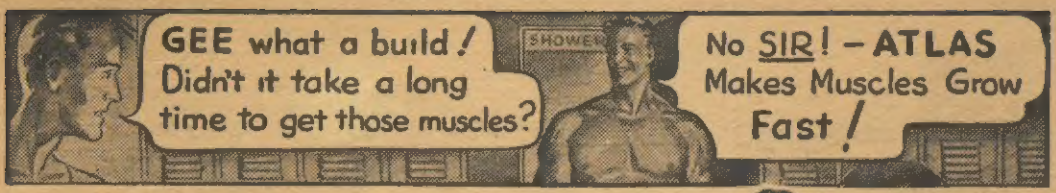
So maybe, after all, I stack up as pretty much of a tenderfoot Westerner, with a gang of books, a typewriter, and a great-grandfather who wandered out West in the wake of the 49'ers and died there, we think. But I do know that once the feeling for the West gets into the blood, there you are. . . . And it's got to come out, somehow or other.

—Bill Cox

Bill Cox will be with us again in the next issue, with a novel that will recreate all the raucous, raw violence and drama of one of the strangest boom-towns we've ever read about—and some of the most realistic flesh-and-blood characters we've ever met in a work of fiction. We've called it "Hide, Hoofs—and Boomer Guns!"

Walt Coburn, king of cowboy authors, Fred Gipson, Texas writing man, Bart Cassidy along with another fast-action Tensleep adventure, will be on deck, too! From this distance it looks like a man-sized fiction rodeo!

The next issue will be published December 30th!



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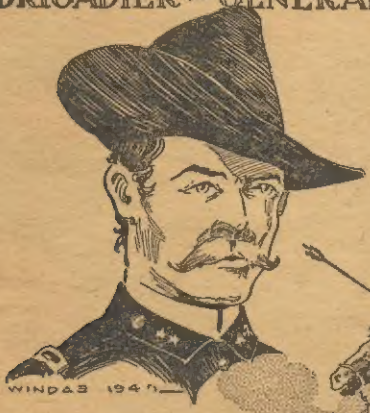
FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

BRIGADIER-GENERAL ALFRED SULLY



(1)

In the dark days of the Civil War, when the forgotten settlers on our far-flung frontiers lived in constant peril from marauding redskins, there came to the defense of scattered ranch and farmhouse, a soldier whose indefatigable courage and resourcefulness saved the West for the whiteman. This loyal son of Minnesota was Brigadier-General Alfred Sully.

(2)

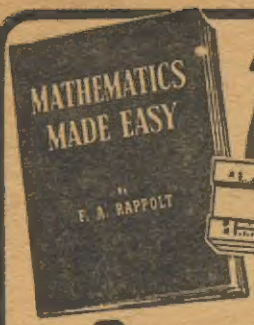
His fightingmen were pitifully few, a handful of regulars and a few hundred volunteers. But with these he quelled the fierce thousands of Sioux, Blackfeet and Cheyennes, ferreting out their concentrations and striking hard wherever they gathered for war. He marched eighty miles from Knife River to Gros Ventres, over high mountains and deep ravines in less than two days, and drove the Indians from their strongly entrenched positions. He got his first sleep in seventy-two hours that night camping on the field of battle.

(3)

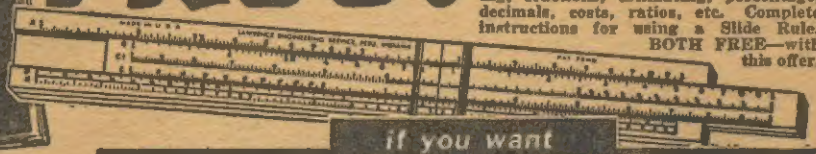
He won the Battle of Yellowstone by a brilliant charge in which he personally slew the Cheyenne chief Big Claw. He chased the combined forces of Blackfeet and Dakotas from the Tahkahtokuty region with two hundred and eighty cavalrymen and a mountain howitzer. With his men on half rations he completed a forced march through the petrified forests in the Bad Lands, and compelled the surrender of Gray Eagle and his truculent Brule warriors.

(4)

In one period of 90 days, General Sully marched his men 1500 miles, sometimes without food, and often with nothing but alkali water to drink. With his own hands he helped drag guns from treacherous quicksands. He fought eighteen skirmishes and four pitched battles, and finally in the face of overwhelming odds, brought peace between white men and red, making the West a place of pleasant habitation for all. He was a great credit to the Service and a frontiersman of the highest possible merit.



FREE!



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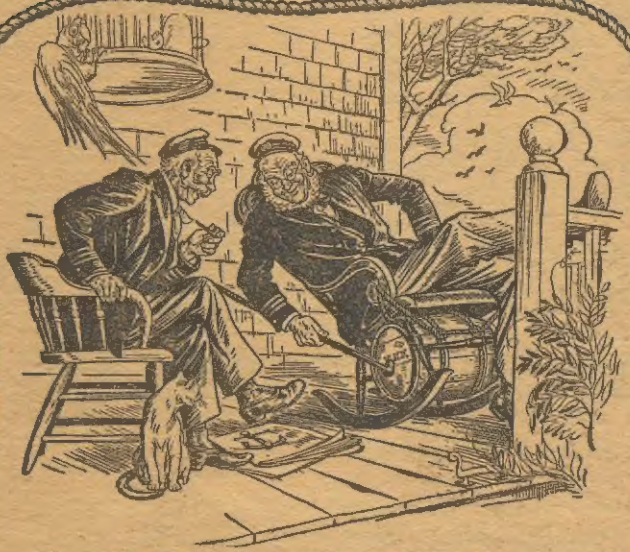

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by don herold

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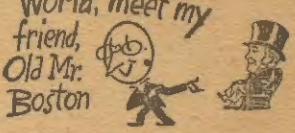

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A Powerfully Human Cow-Country Novel

By

WALT COBURN

CHRISTMAS AT MORMON BASIN

That year of slow, dry death, when the hot air was a nightmare of dying cattle and the hopes of those Arizona cowmen shrivelled like the sun-browned grass, Dally Parker set out with a young Yaqui orphan and his old brindle ketch dog to trail his bone-yard herd to the lush Mormon Basin country.... Too proud to ask his friends for the help he so badly needed, too brave to quit like some of his neighbors —and too much of a rawhide tough Texan to be turned back by any Bronco-Mormon army!

CHAPTER ONE

Dally Parker's Trail Drive

THE long drouth had burned out the lower range. There was no more grass than you'd find on a pine board, and the water holes were now only scum-covered muddy bog-holes. Gaunt cattle were eating cactus and chewing mesquite limbs as thick as a man's thumb. They shuffled along rutted trails, traveling miles under a brassy sun, and when there was nothing but drying mud at the water holes they stood there until their legs weakened and then they laid down and died.

In the bunkhouses or in town where

The Yaqui boy had his machete out as the men on horseback yanked their guns. . . .

they were unsuccessfully trying to get loans from the banks, cowmen said it was the longest, toughest drouth that part of Arizona had ever seen.

The first week in July, Dally Parker took a young Yaqui cowboy and a big old brindle-colored ketch dog rounded up his cattle in the desert country, and pulled out.

Dally was a tall, leathery man with a pair of hard eyes that could, on occasion, soften. Hardship had pulled his clean shaven mouth into a straight grim line. He talked with a Texan drawl. When he got mad he bit his words off and spat them out.

He was called Dally because he was a rawhide reata man who dallied his rope around the saddle horn when he tied onto a calf or steer. And in a country where the brushpopper cowpunchers tied hard and fast, this tall Texan stood out as an

exception to the roping rules.

Now he was working short handed because he couldn't afford a cowpuncher crew. The young Yaqui boy worked for his beans and beef and bread and the few dollars that Dally would give him now and then to buy stick candy.

"Me'n this Yaqui boy and the ketch dog," Dally told the cow-country, "kin git the job done."

They asked Dally where he thought he was headed with that skeleton herd.

"Yonderly," said the close-mouthed, leathery Texan.

And that was as much as they could get out of him.

The Yaqui boy rode the swing and the big brindle ketch dog kept the drags moving, as Dally pointed his six hundred head of gaunt cattle northwest towards the mountains.

They left the bed-ground before daybreak and grazed where there was any grass left, resting during the heat of the

day. They drifted on again into the cool of the evening, and bedded down when the stars came out.

They ate jerky, frijole beans and bread in a skillet. The black coffee was strong as lye and gall-bitter when the water was bad.

There was no good need to stand night guard, because those cattle were too weak and footsore to quit the bed ground.

The big brindle ketch dog would growl and twitch in his sleep when the coyotes yapped. The Yaqui boy never complained. Dally had never been heard to say whether he was cold or wet or hungry or suffering from the desert heat. He had not cussed the drouth as some had. He had not wasted time going to the banks for a loan that would be refused.

He told the Yaqui boy in Mexican that there was a basin high up in the mountains where the summer rains came every day and pine trees grew tall, and the grass brushed a man's stirrups. That was where they were headed, with their drouthed out cattle.

"There are some settlers up in the rough mountains around the Basin," he explained to the Yaqui boy. "As near as I can figure it out, they are Mormon renegades. They broke away from the Mormon church and they set up a religion of their own. This valley pocket in the mountains is called Mormon Basin.

"They don't welcome strangers. I've heard it said that some of the older men have four-five wives. They like to be let alone. They call themselves the Sons and Daughters of the Prophet. . . ."

The Yaqui boy grinned. He liked to talk English. "Always, since I am a little boy, I want to see one of them pine trees. Like in pictures. Like in store windows at Christmas. Them trees they grow red balls and candles with lights and a big silver star at the top. I will like to see them pine trees growin' like that in that country."

The next dawn when they were moving the cattle off the bed-ground the Yaqui boy called out to the Texan.

"I am goin' to get me a sack, señor. I am goin' to fill it with all them things that they grow on them piñon trees."

"Pine cones," said Dally. "They got little nuts in 'em—piñon nuts. . . . Growl them cattle off the bed-ground, Dog. Mebbyso last night was our last dry-camp. We should hit a crick before noon. Git at 'em, Dog."

The Yaqui boy was happy that day. His black eyes shone, and he rode along dreaming about a big gunnysack full of bright red balls and Christmas tree trimmings. Dally had to yell at him a few times to keep the cattle moving.

It was past noon when the lead steers began to quicken their shuffling pace, sniffing water. The big dun-colored Mexican steer with the tip of one horn sawed off, broke into a weary trot. Cows walk-bawled. Calves trailed along. Dally Parker told the Yaqui boy to ride up here in the lead with him and spread the cattle to keep them from piling up along the creek. And he called back to the ketch dog to take 'er easy.

The day had been hot and the cowman, the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog had not tasted water since last night. But it was not until the last tail end of the drags, the last sore footed calf had gotten on water that they went upstream and drank their fill.

Their little string of horses and the two Mexican pack mules were turned loose to graze. The Yaqui boy's wrangling pony grazed at the end of a long picket rope.

When they had finished eating, Dally Parker took a little tally book from his pocket.

"How many we lost, Yaqui?" he asked.

"Fifty-seven. We make the start with five hundred and ninety-two. That makes it we got still five hundred and forty-five head left, countin' that one lame calf you carry on the saddle which mebby won't die now. . . . We get to them tall piñon trees almost any day now?"

"Almost any day now," Dally Parker closed his tally book. The Yaqui boy had carried the tally of dead cattle in his head. That was better than a lot of so-called cowpunchers could do.

PARKER grinned faintly. He was almighty proud of the Yaqui boy. He had practically raised him, after disease had left the boy an orphan near

Dally's ranch, and the cowman had found the half starved little Injun trying to dig a grave to bury his father and mother. With nothing but a broken handled shovel and a Mexican machete to get a hole dug in the rocky ground.

Dally Parker had dug the grave and buried the boy's parents and had taken the boy to his ranch. There he had fixed a hot water bath and made the little Injun scrub his shock of coarse black hair with kerosene and cattle dip. He had ridden to town and fetched back clothes for the boy.

The Yaqui had shed no tears of grief. He had said no word about being hungry, but he had eaten like a starved animal. And when he was dressed in his new clothes he had slipped away at the first opportunity.

Dally had seen the boy down at the creek, grinning at his reflection in the water, examining his new shirt and pants and shoes. And before the boy came back to the cabin he had taken his machete and chopped as much small fire wood as he could carry.

Dally Parker had figured on taking the boy to the big Yaqui village near Tucson and leaving him with his own people. But he couldn't get away because he had calves to brand, and by the time the branding was over something else turned up to delay him. So the young Yaqui had stayed on, doing all sorts of chores without being told. Making a hand around the ranch. And when the time did come when the cowman had time to take the boy to the Yaqui village, he disappeared. And so did the ketch dog.

For three days Dally Parker hunted for him. Then he sighted the boy crawling into an old coyote hole.

"Come on out, Yaqui," he told the boy. "Come on back home. If you want to stay, nobody's goin' to make you go."

The Yaqui boy and the ketch dog came out of the coyote hole. The dog was only a six-months-old pup then.

Dally Parker bought the boy a saddle and gave him a horse to ride. He began teaching the Yaqui boy how to handle cattle. The cowman never had to tell the boy twice about anything.

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Other cowmen joshed Dally Parker about his Yaqui boy. They asked the tall Texan where he had his squaw hid out. Dally Parker didn't mind the joshing—not as long as they grinned and as long as they were his friends. But one man whose grin had a bad twist to it got his teeth knocked out and his nose smashed.

The Yaqui boy was about ten when Dally Parker found him. That was about four years ago. Christmas time, or when there was a rodeo, Dally Parker and the Yaqui boy would come to town. Dally would get drunk and the Yaqui boy would stuff himself with stick candy and eat in restaurants and spend all day looking in store windows. Then they would ride back to the ranch, both of them feeling the after effects of their celebration. The next day they would be back at work.

Dally called the boy Yaqui. He called the brindle ketch dog Dog. It never occurred to the tall Texan to give either the boy or the dog a real name. He fed them what he ate.

His was a Spartan sort of life. His town sprees were his only break in the weeks and months of hard work. He was up before daybreak. He went to bed when his work was done, almost any time after dark.

Now as they sat there on the ground near the creek, Dally wiped his saddle carbine with an oiled rag.

The Yaqui boy watched him. The ketch dog lay stretched out, asleep.

"You think we shoot maybe a deer, señor?" the boy broke the silence.

Dally Parker never packed a saddle gun unless he was going off into the hills after a deer.

The cowman's straight-lipped mouth spread flatly. "Nope. Them bronco Mormons might show up."

The Yaqui boy asked no more questions. But after a while he got up and walked over to his saddle. He slid the heavy bladed machete from its homemade leather scabbard. It was the only weapon the Yaqui boy owned. But until now he had never thought of it as a weapon. He used it to chop sticks for the fire or clear brush.

He took a whetstone from his pocket and began sliding it back and forth along the sharp edge.

Dally Parker watched him from under a slanted hatbrim. His grin tightened, pulling the corners of his mouth. He finished cleaning his saddle-gun and shoved cartridges into the magazine.

Dally Parker wore an old cartridge belt around his flanks. A wooden-handled six-shooter in an old open holster.

He leaned the Winchester against the trunk of the big sycamore tree and began rubbing the dust from his six-shooter.

The scarred, stub-tailed, ragged-eared ketch dog growled and whimpered and twitched. Dreaming of some wild race in the brush after an outlaw steer.

From the brushy, boulder-strewn canyon up the creek came the sound of men and horses.

The big brindle ketch dog was on its feet, the short hair along its neck and shoulders stiffened. The Yaqui boy gripped the handle of his machete.

"Down, Dog," said Dally Parker. "Set still, Yaqui."

Dally Parker slid his six-shooter back into its holster and got to his feet. He stood there watching the four men who rode out of the brush and into the clearing.

THEY packed six-shooters and saddle guns. The oldest of the four was probably in his early thirties. The youngest was no more than seventeen. The oldest man's stubble of beard was a dirty yellow, his eyes a pale gray under bleached brows. He was scowling as he rode a little ahead of the others. He was about ten feet away from Dally Parker when he pulled up.

"Where do you think you're goin'," he motioned towards the grazing cattle, "with that drive of hide and bones?"

"Where there's feed and water," said Dally Parker, "that'll put taller on 'em." His voice was soft.

"Meanin' just where, mister?"

"Meanin'," said Dally Parker, "a place called Mormon Basin."

One of the other cowpunchers laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh, and the Yaqui boy was on his feet, the machete in his hand. His black eyes glittered. The ketch dog growled.

"Take 'er easy, Yaqui," said Dally Parker. "Easy, Dog."

"We could kill you and that Injun and that dog," said the thick-set cowpuncher with the sandy whiskers. "Nobody would be the wiser. We could wipe you out right here and take your scarecrow herd for ourselves."

"I doubt it." Dally Parker bit off his words.

"Do you know who we are? You know who I am?"

"I ain't int'rested."

There was something about Dally Parker's eyes and the tone of his voice that stopped the man. His pale gray eyes shifted.

"Why don't you step off your horse, Tug," said one of the others, "and drag it outa him? We'll see you don't git the worst of it."

"Step down," said Dally Parker, "and have at it."

"Take 'im, Tug," grinned the youngest cowboy. "Like you taken many another like 'im."

The sandy whiskered cowpuncher swung from his saddle.

He unbuckled his cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter and handed them to the youngest of his cowpunchers. Then he unsnapped his bullhide chaps, jerked them off and tossed them on the ground. He grinned flatly and spat on his thick, muscular hands.

He was at least ten years younger than Dally Parker; bull-necked, thick-shouldered and barrel-chested. He came at the tall cowman slowly, until he was within a few feet of him. While Dally unbuckled his cartridge belt and six-shooter and dropped them on the ground near his saddle gun.

"Keep 'em off my back, Yaqui," he bit off his words. "Watch 'em, Dog."

Then the blocky man came at him with a bull rush.

Dally Parker could move fast and he was all rawhide. He stepped to one side and one of his long arms reached out and caught the other man's swinging fist just above the wrist. He gave a yank and his leg tripped the whiskered man.

Dally Parker threw the man, landed astraddle of his back, and twisted his arm back in a hammerlock. His other hand was tangled in the thick curly yellow hair of the burly cowpuncher. Dally yanked the man's head up, then slammed his face into the ground. There was the sickening sound of smashed bone and flesh.

The other men on horseback yanked their guns. The Yaqui boy jumped like a mountain cat and yanked one off his horse.

"Git 'em, Dog!" Dally Parker called out sharply.

The brindle ketch dog snapped at the hocks of one horse. The horse started pitching. Then the dog swung onto the tail of the other horse and that horse snorted and whirled and bucked.

Guns roared and bullets went wild. The Yaqui boy had the youngest of the four bronco Mormons down, and the heavy bladed machete was ready to swing.

The other two men had bucked off and Dally Parker was on his feet, his six-shooter in his hand.

The burly cowboy with the dirty sandy whiskers was sitting up slowly, his hands wiping blood and dirt from his face.

A big man with a white spade beard rode up, a Winchester in the crook of his arm. He was forking a big black gelding. There was lightning in his hard steel gray eyes that were set deep under ragged gray brows. His heavy gray hair nearly touched his shoulders.

"What goes on here?" His voice was a deep-chested rumble.

"That'll do, Yaqui," said Dally Parker. "Down, Dog."

His eyes watched the big bearded man on the black gelding. He matched the big man's voice for steadiness.

"Them four tough cowhands," he said, "aimed to kill me and the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog. They didn't git their job done."

"Those are four of my sons." The big bearded man's voice had a deep growl to it. "This is my range. I am Solomon Smith."

"That's my Yaqui boy," Dally Parker bit off his words. "That's my ketch dog. Them's my cattle. Accordin' to the United States Gover'ment map I got with me, this range and the Mormon Basin is land that still belongs to the big feller called Uncle Sam. I'm aimin' to throw them

drouthed-out cattle into Mormon Basin, and I don't aim to be halted. My name is Dally Parker."

CHAPTER TWO

Jack-Mormon's Deadline

SOLOMON SMITH told his four stalwart sons to get on their horses and head for home. His voice had the hard bite of a man accustomed to giving orders and having those orders obeyed. At the same time it had the sonorous depth of tone belonging to a preacher of sermons.

Dally Parker buckled on his cartridge belt and six-shooter. He waited for the big bearded man to break the silence.

"You are the first outsider," said Solomon Smith, "ever to come here with a cattle drive. We have our own colony, our own belief. No man, woman or child has ever gone outside the boundaries of our range. We are a people set apart by the hand of God. We have our own laws. There is no welcome here for an outsider."

"I seen that," said Dally Parker grimly.

He walked over to his chaps and took a folded map from one of the deep pockets. His gnarled, brush-scabbed hands spread the map out on a rawhide kyack box.

"This gover'ment map shows the grazin' land and forest land open to the cowman. I got a gover'ment permit to graze six hundred head of cattle in this mountain country. Providin' that weak calf yonder lives, I'm turnin' five hundred and forty-five head of cows, calves and steers into Mormon Basin."

Dally Parker poked a forefinger at that part of the map. Then folded it and put it back in his chaps pocket.

"You and your brand of religion don't make no difference to me. I ain't a joiner. I don't bother no man's beliefs. And that goes for your laws.

"We're leavin' them cattle there. When we git around to it in November, December, we'll come back and gather five hundred and forty-five head of cattle. There ain't no more to be said about it."

The bearded man's hard steel-gray eyes were glinting.

The ketch dog stood beside the Yaqui boy, hair bristled, growling very softly.

Dally Parker stood there on his long legs, twisting a brown paper cigarette into shape. His puckered eyes matching the bearded man's for coldness.

Then Solomon Smith reined his big black gelding and rode away without a word or a backward glance, his saddle gun in the crook of his arm.

"Yonder," Dally Parker spoke in English to the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog, "rides the daddy of 'em all—the bull of the tall timber. The *jefe*, the leader of the bronco Mormons. They say he's got a dozen wives and each of them wives is raisin' him a big family. But it don't seem likely that ary one man would gather hisself that much grief in the way of family troubles."

Dally Parker's eyes lighted up and his straight lipped mouth spread in a grin. He was a bachelor, set in his way. Afraid of women, some said. Others claimed he was a woman hater for some reason. At any rate, the idea of Solomon Smith having a dozen wives tickled his grim sense of humor.

Then he remembered the fight. "I was plain lucky. That Tug feller would be tough to handle. . . . Yaqui, you and that ketch dog will do to take along anywheres."

That was as much praise as ever the Yaqui boy or the ketch dog got. Dally Parker had a notion that praise softened a man or a dog. Dally Parker had never patted the ketch dog. But he had just now paid them the greatest tribute in his cowman's book.

They camped here a week, then started moving on into the higher mountains, through a narrow saddle between two timbered buttes and into a fertile valley where there were small ranches.

Orchards of apple and pear trees were loaded with fruit, and other fruit trees were in full pink bloom. In a small village of log buildings, some of them whitewashed, there was a general store, a church, a schoolhouse. A creek of swift running crystal water was set among giant cottonwoods and sycamores.

They had to trail their cattle through long lanes where the hay meadows and pastures and orchards and corn fields were protected by worm fences of split rails.

Dally rode up on the point. That big dun Mexican steer with the tip of one sawed horn was still in the lead. A brockle-faced cow with a drooped horn shuffled along with the drags.

The Yaqui's boy's eyes were shining like black stars. Apples on trees! Millions of red apples, and some of the fruit-laden branches were hanging outside the rail fence. The Yaqui boy picked them as he rode along, stuffing the dusty red apples inside his shirt, into the pockets of his chaps.

The ketch dog kept the drags moving. Now and then the brockle-faced cow hooked at the dog and the ketch dog got out of her way.

Women stood in doorways, with children clinging to their aprons, watching them pass through the lane in a sluggish sunlit haze of dust. Here was farmer soil, Mormon soil.

It was not until they trailed their cattle past the widening in the road that was the village of Solomon that they saw any men.

There must have been fifty of them lounging around in front of the general store, with saddled horses tied at the hitchracks. Tug Smith had his face partly hidden by bandages. They sat on the plank platform or squatted on their boot heels on the ground. Silent, grim-looking, hard-eyed. Some of the younger men packed six-shooters. The older men seemed to be unarmed.

Dally Parker sat stiff-backed in his saddle. The lead cattle followed that big dun steer to hell and back and the dun steer had been a lead steer, used to leading wild cattle out of the brush country to the shipping yards. Dally called him "that dun ox." And now the dun ox was traveling along at a shuffling walk, headed for water and green grass.

The bulk of the drive was past the village and into the dusty lane ahead and Dally Parker was beginning to breathe easier. Then he heard a commotion at the drag end of the herd and whirled his big, sweat-streaked brown horse around.

Half a dozen mongrel dogs—pot hounds, Dally called them—had charged the brindle ketch dog. The brindle was as big as a Great Dane, with the chest and blunt jaws of a bulldog. Now as the mongrel pack of long-eared hounds charged, the ketch dog took them on.

THE Yaqui boy yanked his heavy machete from its saddle scabbard. His sweat-streaked, swarthy face looked grim as he swung from his saddle, the machete in his hand, when Dally Parker rode up. Red apples were popping out of the Yaqui boy's pockets, out of his shirt. He was slapping at the mongrel hounds with the flat blade.

Tug Smith and his three brothers started after the Yaqui boy. The ketch dog needed no help. He grabbed a hound by the throat, shook it, flung it yelping and bleeding to one side, then grabbed another hound. The ketch dog was cleaning that hound pack like they were so many rabbits.

"Git on your horse, Yaqui!" Dally Parker's voice cracked like a whiplash.

He rode in between the Yaqui boy, the fighting dogs, and a dozen young cowpunchers who all looked like Solomon Smith. Dally's long-barreled six-shooter was in his hand. He snapped each word short.

"Git back! You bother that ketch dog or that Yaqui boy, and I'll bother you jack-Mormons till I run outa ca'tridges. Git back!"

"They send them damn hounds after the ketch dog!" The Yaqui boy was glaring at Tug Smith and his brother.

"Git 'em, Dog!" snapped Dally Parker. Then he spoke to the Yaqui without taking his eyes from the crowd of men and the dozen young cowpunchers.

"Keep them cattle a-movin', Yaqui. Don't spill none."

The ketch dog flung the last of the pot hounds into the dust, and the mongrels were limping away, whining and yelping. The big brindle ketch dog was nicked in a few places. His eyes were red with the light of battle, his stump of a tail stood erect and the hairs along his back and neck were stiff as hog bristles. The ketch dog sneezed a couple of times to get the dust out of his nostrils. Then he trotted after the Yaqui boy.

As Dally Parker slid his six-shooter back into its holster and rode slowly

towards the crowd of men on the platform, Solomon Smith came out of the store. He wore black pants tucked into the tops of heavy farmer boots and an old black frock coat that came to his knees.

The crowd made way for him, stirring uneasily. The big bearded leader towered head and shoulders above the tallest man there.

Dally Parker's eyes were bloodshot from dust and sun glare, and hard as black agate. He sat stiff in his saddle, his hand on his gun. And he followed his habit of letting the other man talk first.

"Take your cattle," rumbled the deep voice of Solomon Smith, "on to Mormon Basin."

Dally Parker reined his horse and rode away, his dust-powdered, sweat-marked hat slanted across his eyes. He saw the red apples that had spilled from the boy's pockets there in the thick dust. He was grinning faintly when he caught up with Yaqui.

"You shore rained red apples back yonder, Yaqui. Got any left?"

"Maybe three, señor. They was so many on them trees. Some fallin' off to the ground. Lots on the ground. I don't think they tally all them apples. They don' miss a few."

"Ahead," said Dally Parker, "is plenty more. There's a gunnysack on that gruya pack mule. Fill it with what you want.... The ketch dog shore taken them jack-Mormon pot hounds like they was so many rabbits. You better keep that machete in its scabbard, Yaqui."

They trailed the cattle out of the valley and up through some timber and into Mormon Basin just as the sun went down. There was a lake down below and the grass grew thick and tall. The big pine trees seemed to touch the sky in the sunset.

They let the cattle drift down onto feed and water. This was the end of the long trail. Dally Parker's grim mouth spread in a grin. But there was no grin on the bronzed, dust powdered, sweat streaked face of the Yaqui boy. He sat his horse, staring at the tall pine trees, his eyes clouded.

"Them red balls that shine like glass," he said. "Them candle lights. No big silver star on the tops. Them piñon trees. Them Christmas trees ain't growin' them things, señor."

The Yaqui boy had a sack of red apples. Tied to his saddle was another gunnysack. Not a new one, but it was washed and scrubbed until its brown weave was as clean as anything. The Yaqui boy jerked loose the knotted saddle string that held it. He threw it away.

Then Dally Parker understood. And it took him a long minute and a lot of quick thinking to find the right words to say.

"It's the wrong season, Yaqui. Like the beans on the mesquite come after the rains. Like the cactus blooms only one time in the year." Dally Parker spoke in the Mexican language to make the Yaqui boy understand more easily.

"In the winter when the snow comes," he went on, trying to wipe that look of disillusionment from the Yaqui boy's eyes, "when Christmas time comes. What we call Santa Claus. Old Tio Poleto with the white whiskers and the fat belly and the red coat, driving reindeer. That is the season when sometimes one of the tall piñons bears those red balls, stick candy and lights and the big silver star on top. . . . This just is not the right season of the year for that, Yaqui."

The light came back into the Yaqui boy's black eyes. "Just at the Christmas time. Tio Poleto comes. Sure. For the little kids. I know. But not all them piñon trees have them things?"

"Only a few."

"I would like to see just one," said the Yaqui boy, "growin' on the ground and not in the store window, with them things. So I can fill my sack. Just like from the tree with the red apples."

"We'll come back after these cattle," Dally Parker said, "just about then. We'll look for a pine tree with them trimmin's."

The Yaqui boy's white teeth showed in a quick grin. His black eyes sparkled.

"I will take good care of the gunnysack to keep it clean, then."

He got off his horse and retrieved the gunnysack. Dally Parker told himself that he had sure caught himself in his own loop. But twice now in the past week the Yaqui boy had shown that he had courage and loyalty and all that it

takes to make a hand. And the cowman winced inside when he saw that stricken look in the Yaqui boy's eyes. There would be a Christmas tree for that Yaqui boy, come hell or high water!

"How many cattle you tally into the Mormon Basin, Yaqui?" Dally Parker changed the subject.

"Five hundred and forty-five. I'm glad that calf don't die. He's got the guts. That Dun Ox lead the way. Old Abuelita come last like always."

"Abuelita?"

"Old Grandma. The brockle-face' old cow. Mama of the calf. She too has guts, señor. All the way from home she hooks at the ketch dog. I think that even the ketch dog he likes that old cow."

was a round white moon. As they unloaded the pack mules and pulled off their saddles, Dally Parker noticed the board tacked to a tree trunk.

He struck a match and held the yellow flame cupped in his gnarled hands, its light revealing the lettering on the sign:

WARNING! GET OFF THIS RANGE! DON'T COME BACK!

Dally Parker ripped down the wooden slab, smashed it and threw it on the supper fire.

That night he and the Yaqui spread their bed tarps and blankets in behind the brush and the cowman slept lightly, his hand near his gun.

Whether they're wearing khaki, cover-alls, or chaps, you'll find the men who do a real job of work also relish the kind of hard-hitting Western fiction that only Walt Coburn can write! In the next issue, you'll have another date with that writing cowboy when he'll give us another smashing long story—"Hell Starts at Pulpito!" Reserve your February DIME WESTERN today! Read it—enjoy it—December 30th!

"That tallies 'em, Yaqui. We'll ride loose herd on 'em for a week till they git located. Then we'll go back home. Come back about snow time and gather 'em."

"Maybe them hombres butcher some," said the Yaqui.

"We tallied four hundred and forty-five head into Mormon Basin," said Dally Parker flatly. "We'll tally that many out, come snow-time."

There was a dead finality to the Texan's voice.

A week later Dally Parker, the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog came out of Mormon Basin with their little string of saddle horses and pack mules. Through the long valley and past the little settlement, running the gauntlet of unfriendly, hostile eyes. Dally Parker's eyes were hard and dangerous as the Yaqui boy eyed the apple trees with their heavy red laden branches.

Late that night they pulled in on the camp ground where they had had the fight with the younger Smiths. For miles beyond the desert stretched out below. There

All night long the hoot owls called back and forth in the timber. The ketch dog growled softly. But there was no attack, and the next dawn found them on their way home.

That day the desert sky blackened and the rain came down in heavy sheets that made the dry washes raging torrents of muddy flash flood water. But the rains had come too late.

CHAPTER THREE

Cowmen Pardners

EVEN before Dally Parker got back to his ranch in the foothills at the edge of the desert, the cow country knew that he had taken the remnants of his drouth stricken cattle up into the mountains to Mormon Basin.

His friends shook their heads and said it was a locoed thing to do. To his face they joshed him about throwing in with the bronco Mormons and hoorawed him about how many wives did he have hid out back in the mountains. Dally Parker took their joshing in his own grim way.

When they told him he'd never gather those cattle, he said he'd bet cow for cow, calf for calf, steer for steer with them that he'd gather what cattle he'd left in Mormon Basin. A big cowman from the Mexican Border took that bet.

Behind his back Dally Parker's enemies grinned and gloated. They told one another that this was once the tall Texan had bit off a bigger hunk of tough meat than he'd ever be able to chew and swallow.

Dally Parker took the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog and worked back in the hills. There were some cattle he had missed, and other cattle had been too weak to start on that long drive. But the late rains had brought grass and these cattle had survived. But they were only a pitiful handful. The bulk of his cattle were at Mormon Basin.

If the cowman was worried he gave no sign of it. He was gambling with the remnants of his cattle. If he lost them, then he lost, and he wasn't going to be hunting a crying towel. He was getting too far along in years to ever make a new start. When the sign was right, he'd go after his cattle. If he didn't gather them, then he wouldn't be coming back. Neither would the Yaqui boy or the ketch dog. It was as final as that.

August brought almost daily rains. September's sun cured the grass. The desert weather cooled in October and November. But Dally Parker was not yet ready to go after his cattle.

He was remembering that world of feed and water in Mormon Basin. Picturing to himself how those cattle would be looking by now. They would be fat; their meat would be solid. "Taller on their ribs," he called it. By the middle of December those cattle would be in just the right shape. December rains on the desert would fill the water holes and replenish the dried creeks and there would be no dry camps on the way back.

The Yaqui boy had somehow gotten hold of a brand new gunnysack. A big one. He folded it carefully and put it in his bed. That was the sort of sack to have. New and clean. Big enough to hold all those shining red balls and strings of tinsel, sticks of candy, with their red and white stripes. And the big silver star.

He was going to wrap that big silver star in a new red silk neckscarf that he had bought during rodeo week at Tucson. He was going to gather rocks and make a monument with a niche in it like the Mexicans made back in the hills. He was already making that rock monument where his father and mother were buried.

Days when his ranch chores were done, the Yaqui boy went there and worked on that rock shrine with the niche, putting the flat rocks together and cementing them with adobe mud mixed with grass. And when December came and Dally Parker went to town and fetched back grub, the Yaqui boy put the finishing touches on that rock and adobe shrine at the grave of his father and mother.

There, he told himself, in that niche he'd put the big silver star. The silver star that had something to do with Tio Poleto. The fat hombre with the red coat and the big white beard who rode in a sled and drove a string of buck deer.

The Yaqui boy had been too young to learn the belief of his parents. The Mexicans had their shrines with *santos,* where they burned candles in old broken bottles. The Yaqui boy had to make up his own religion. And it was a strange mixture that only he could explain in his own mind. That big silver star was its shining symbol.

The rock and adobe shrine was finished, all ready for the silver star that the Yaqui would fetch back. He rode back to the ranch in the dusk.

Dally Parker, on his way back from town, passed the Yaqui graves. He reined up and studied the rock and adobe shrine. Shaking his head, a puzzled look in his eyes. Then he rode on to the ranch with the grub.

Dally Parker made no mention of the fact that he had seen the shrine with its empty niche. That was his way. If anybody wanted to believe in any sort of religion, that was their business. He had his cattle to gather and he was pulling out in the morning. He had fetched enough cartridges from town to take care of any bronco Mormons who got in his way.

In town a few of his cowmen friends had told him that when he got ready to

go after his cattle, they'd be proud to go along.

Dally Parker had grinned flatly and shook his head. "Me'n the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog will git the job done."

You couldn't argue with a man like that. He stopped you with a few words.

He told the Yaqui boy to get himself some sleep, that they'd be pulling out at daybreak.

The Yaqui boy nodded. The kyack boxes were already packed with grub, horseshoes, coffeepot, and skillet. He ran his whetstone along the edge of the heavy bladed machete.

Dally Parker tossed the Yaqui boy a package wrapped in the heavy brown paper used at the saddle shop.

"It's a leather jacket like mine, Yaqui. It'll be kinda cold up in them mountains, mebby."

And he grinned as he watched the Yaqui boy's eyes shine. The Yaqui boy wore the leather jacket to bed that night, smelling its new leathery odor, feeling its soft texture. It took little to make the Yaqui boy happy.

THE sun was bright and warm across the strip of desert, but when they reached the mountains there was a sharp bite to the little wind that came down from the snow-capped peaks to the north.

They camped at the creek where Dally Parker had torn down the warning sign. There were patches of snow in the canyons where the sun had not penetrated.

There was a sign tacked to the same tree. Rain and sun had dimmed the lettering but it could still be read:

WARNING! THIS IS THE BOUNDARY LINE. DON'T CROSS IT!

Dally Parker ripped the board down and told the Yaqui boy to start his fire with it.

"That ain't the big feller," he told himself. "That ain't Solomon Smith's doin's. It's that Tug and his litter of tow-headed bronco Mormon part-brothers. They'd shore like to throw a scare into a man. Dammit, that kain't be done. An' that white-whiskered ol' daddy of 'em all knows it kain't be done!"

When supper was over Dally Parker told the Yaqui boy to go to bed. "Bed down in that brush yonder with Dog. I'm a-settin' up a while."

Dally Parker "set up a-while" back in the shadows. The campfire was dead, and the blanket wrapped around him kept out the chill. The saddle carbine rested across his lap as he dozed now and then. The ketch dog growled and the cowman jerked awake, his saddle gun gripped in his gloved hands. Somewhere in the black shadows a dry twig snapped. Beyond that sounded the hoot of a little tecolote owl.

The Yaqui boy was not asleep. Dally Parker knew that. He could tell by the way the ketch dog softened his deep growl with a low whimper. That meant the Yaqui boy was whispering in the dog's ragged ear.

Dally Parker grinned faintly. The Yaqui boy and that ketch dog would do to take along. They wouldn't quit in a tight. They just did their work. The Yaqui boy would be awake, that old machete in his hand, and the big brindle ketch dog on guard.

"Them damned jack Mormons!" muttered Dally Parker.

The night was long and the stars were cold. Dally Parker, during the past hard years, had broken a few bones. Those bones had knitted and left knots and the cold mountain night was putting aches into those knotted bones. The cold bit through his clothes and into his marrow and he kept working his fingers and hands so that if those slinking hombres out yonder took a notion to come closer, his gun wouldn't miss.

Then his wrists and hands and fingers got lame and stiff and his lean jaws clamped to keep his teeth from chattering. It was a long, long night before daylight broke and he called to the Yaqui boy to come out of the blankets. Knowing all the time that the Yaqui boy had been wide awake all night.

They were eating breakfast when Tug Smith and the half dozen younger brothers who all looked like Solomon Smith rode up. They had been back yonder somewhere. And from the bloodshot look of their red-rimmed eyes, Dally Parker

knew that they had been sitting around an all night campfire with a jug.

"You don't believe in signs, do you, Parker?" Tug Smith's voice was a match for the twisted grin on his face.

"I ain't spooky," said Dally Parker. "I ain't superstitious. Why don't you boys git on home and sleep it off?"

"Supposin' we don't?" Tug Smith's voice was ugly. But there was a crafty glint in his pale, bloodshot eyes.

"That," said Dally Parker, "would be to your sorrow. Solomon Smith never sent you here. He don't play his cards thataway. What's your game?"

Tug Smith grinned crookedly at the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog, then turned to Dally Parker.

"This all the round-up crew you've got, mister?"

"That's all of us," drawled the straight-backed Texan. "It's a-plenty."

"You ain't seen those cattle you left in Mormon Basin," said Tug Smith. "They're scattered from hell to breakfast, wilder than mountain sheep. They're all still where you left 'em. But they're not weak any more. They'll be hard to gather. It'll take a round-up crew to gather 'em. We'll gather and deliver 'em here to you for ten dollars a head."

There could be a whole lot of truth in what the half-tipsy Tug Smith was saying. Dally Parker was expecting a hard job ahead of him. He knew cattle. He knew his own limitations. But he was not being crowded into anything.

Dally's straight-lipped grin matched the hardness of his eyes. He broke his words off short.

"Git! Git on back to your mammy's apron strings. You ain't dry behind the ears. Now git along your way home before I commence!"

Perhaps the reputation of Dally Parker had traveled this far. It might have been that Tug Smith and every other man in this mountain country had heard how Dally had crossed two thirds of Mexico alone, during a revolution, to kill a Mexican who had murdered his brother and his sister-in-law on the Border. And the Señor Dios alone knew how many other Mexicans had been killed when they had tried to stop that lone ride of Dally Parker's.

It might have been the hard, flinty look in the eyes of Dally Parker that made Tug Smith weaken.

"Before you get your damned cattle out of Mormon Basin," he blustered, "you'll be hollerin' for help! Let's go, boys. We'll wait till he hollers. Then it'll cost him plenty to git his cattle. So-long, Parker. It looks like a storm a-comin'."

When they had ridden away, Dally Parker grinned mirthlessly at the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog.

"Solomon Smith," he said, "don't drink, smoke, chew ner cuss. He's got a dozen wives, they tell me. . . . Make that coffee strong this mornin', Yaqui. Feed the ketch dog good. We're ridin' through that Solomon Valley like it wasn't there. Then we'll drop over into Mormon Basin and commence our round-up."

The Yaqui boy's white teeth showed in a grin. "The Dun Ox, old Abuelita, and that calf I call Plenty Guts are like old friends. It's gettin' close to that time when them piñon trees she'll come ripe, no? I got the sack ready. Tio Poleto's Day. Them shiny red balls and the candles and that silver star. . . . The sack is new. Is clean. Is all ready."

Dally Parker only half heard what the Yaqui boy was saying, and even then it didn't register in his cowpuncher mind. He was thinking about those cattle in Mormon Basin and how hard they'd be to gather. Maybe those Jack-Mormon boys had been roping at them, making them wilder. But you can't cuss a man for trying. He was short-handed and with a storm coming. This chill wind bit through any kind of clothes a man could wear.

Dally Parker and the Yaqui boy couldn't afford enough warm clothes. Dally hadn't given much thought to it, anyhow. A cowhand's hide was supposed to be tough.

Dally and the Yaqui boy warmed their bellies around the little campfire while their backs chilled. The ketch dog shivered but would not come near the fire.

Dogs are wise like that. No use in getting warm for a few minutes or half an hour. It would only make the long gray hours later on seem colder. The ketch dog chewed strips of jerky and stood

on his four legs that might stiffen up if he laid down too long.

He was nearly five years old. That's too old for a ketch dog that has been hooked and kicked by wild cattle, ripped by bob cats and mountain lions, licked his own wounds and whipped his own weight in anything that he ever tackled. He lived on jerky and Mexican frijole beans and fried bread just like a cowhand. He asked no favors, and gave all that a dog's heart and guts can give. Ketch dog—not even a name. . . .

The Yaqui boy rubbed the dog's ragged ears and the ketch dog's stump of a tail wiggled. The dog's head muzzled the any man's hands. The dog's red-brown Yaqui boy's hand. He had never licked yellow eyes worshipped the Yaqui boy, respected Dally Parker. . . .

They were, as the big cowman along the Mexican Border put it, the three damndest things he'd ever seen work cattle.

The big cowman from the Mexican Border was worth a million or two. He drank a lot of whiskey. He was a quart a day man. He was drunk now at the Mexican side of Nogales. His ranch straddled the Mexican Border as the Mexican Line splits Nogales Mexico from Nogales Arizona.

"I bet Dally Parker," he was saying, "cow for cow, calf for calf, steer for steer, that he won't bring his cattle out of Mormon Basin. And I hope to God I lose! Listen, Pancho, my saloon-keeping amigo, I hope I lose. If anything happens to Dally Parker, to that Yaqui boy or to that ketch dog, I'll get the Rangers to go up there! I'll . . ."

"Dallies Parker," said the Nogales saloonman, "he don't need no kind of Rangers. He don't even like them Rangers. . . . I too hope you lose that bet you make. Now we have one dreenk on the house. Maybe we both need it."

CHAPTER FOUR

Dally Goes to War

DALLY PARKER, the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog rode through the long lanes between the split rail fences and now the limbs of the apple and pear and peach trees were bare. Leafless cottonwoods and sycamores stood like gaunt skeletons against the gray sky. There were patches of old snow on the ground that was hard and rutted and frozen.

Smoke came from the chimneys of log houses. Now and then a door opened and a woman or children would come out and watch while they passed. No men were in sight.

When they reached the village, Dally Parker told the Yaqui boy to go on with the string of horses and the pack mules. He rode over to the wide plank platform in front of the store and swung from his saddle. His spurs jingled as he crossed the platform and opened the door.

There must have been fifteen or twenty gray-haired men in the store, sitting around the round-bellied stove that was cherry red. There were a couple of checker games going and a game of seven-up. They had taken off their overcoats and the earflaps of their caps were turned up. Their eyes were cold, hostile.

The paunchy storeman came from behind the counter. Black sateen protectors covered his shirt sleeves from the elbow down. His eyes were small and shrewd and china blue.

"Whatever you come to buy," he said flatly, "I ain't got it."

The men in the store kept watching. Dally Parker's gloved hands clenched. Then he walked past the storekeeper and over to where Solomon Smith sat playing checkers.

"I've come after them cattle of mine," Dally Parker's voice was slow, deliberate. "Them big sons of yourn tried to stop me. If they bother me or my Yaqui boy or my ketch dog while we're a-workin', it'll be their hard luck."

Solomon Smith scowled up at the tall, stiff backed Texan. "Gather your cattle, Parker. Break no laws here and you'll not be molested. Violate our laws and you will be punished accordingly. The sooner you get those cattle out, the better. Good-day."

Solomon Smith went back to his checkers. Dally turned and walked out, past counters piled high with heavy blanket and shipskin-lined canvas coats, thick wool pants. That was the sort of clothing he

and the Yaqui boy needed. But he would rather freeze to death now than buy so much as a warm cap with earflaps or a pair of overshoes. Or stick candy for the Yaqui boy.

"Them jack Mormon sons," he gritted.

He left the store door wide open as he went out. He hoped that pig-eyed storeman would call him back to shut it. But the storekeeper shut his own door.

There was snow on the ground when they made camp that evening in Mormon Basin. There was a chill wind that drove flurries of dry, hard snow into their faces. Their hands and feet were numb and cold and the wind stiffened their faces. In this dusk Mormon Basin looked gray and cold and the wind coming through the tall pines had a dismal whine.

Dally Parker had fetched along a one-man tepee and he told the Yaqui boy they'd throw their beds together for warmth and sleep inside the tepee. The strong black coffee and hot grub warmed their bellies. The big pine wood fire felt good and its yellow blaze was cheerful.

The tall Texan had no false hopes about the long hard days ahead of them. Those cattle would be wild. That big husky jack Mormon cowboy had not needed to lie. Half a dozen men could get the job done without too much trouble. But Dally Parker had no money to hire a crew. And he had been too prideful to accept the free help of his friends.

As for these young bronco Mormons with their damned ten dollars a head proposition. . . .

Anger warmed Dally Parker more than the steaming black coffee or the big pine log fire. To hell with 'em! He had told them what he was going to do and he aimed to do it.

The Yaqui boy said he'd as soon sleep out in the open near the big fire. Maybe them big piñons would grow them shining red balls and that silver star tonight. It was almost that Christmas time.

"It ain't the night for that," Dally Parker told him. Fleas or no fleas, you kin fetch the ketch dog into the tepee. If that's what's ailin' you."

"The ketch dog ain't got so many fleas like he had before, señor. When he makes them dreams, I'll shut him up quick."

So the three of them slept inside the tepee. Whenever the ketch dog started to growl and whimper in his sleep, the Yaqui reached out and rubbed the dog's ragged ears. Whenever he began scratching the Yaqui boy would grab the dog's leg.

They built up the fire before daybreak. Dally Parker cooked breakfast while the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog wrangled horses.

At dawn they were in the saddle. It was still spitting hard dry snow. The wind cut like a saw. They rode the humps out of their horses' backs and rode out on their first morning's circle.

By noon Dally Parker realized the toughness of the job he had tackled. The cattle he had thrown in here were in better shape than any cattle he had ever seen down yonder in the desert country. But they were wild. Hard to gather and hard to hold.

"Them young Jack-Mormons has bin ropin' at 'em. Contestin' them steers. Makin' 'em wilder'n deer. We got to work easy, Yaqui. I'd like to locate that Dun Ox. . . ."

"Old Abuelita," nodded the Yaqui boy, "and that Plenty Guts calf. He'll be big now, I bet. That old cow he's got lots of good brains for one cow."

They buttoned their leather jackets and kicked their feet against the stirrups and tied their silk neck scarfs around their ears. Cold made their hands numb and clumsy. They rode all day, not trying to gather any cattle, working the outer rim and throwing what cattle they found down towards the middle of Mormon Basin. They got a rough count on what cattle they found and worked through on empty bellies.

It was nearly dark when they got back to camp, tired, stiff with cold, and hungry. The snow storm was getting thicker, so that in the gray-black light of coming night, it was difficult to see well.

Dally and the Yaqui boy heard the ketch dog growl. Then they saw what was left of their camp.

THE rawhide kyack boxes, with canvas tarpaulin covering were knocked over, sacks of flour and beans and coffee torn open. Grub was

scattered and trampled in the snow. The tepee knocked down, ripped. Their blankets strewn around, their warsacks emptied and their extra clothing trampled and scattered in the snow. From the sign it looked like a bunch of wild cattle had been driven through the little camp, trampling, smashing, and destroying, in a blind stampede.

But wild cattle can't cut the leather string that holds shut the mouth of a canvas warsack and spill a man's extra shirt and socks and underwear and shaving outfit out on the snow. Cattle don't drop cigarette butts around or leave an empty whiskey bottle behind.

Dally Parker sat his horse there in the dusk and cussed. They could gather their tarps and blankets. They might be able to repair the tepee. But their flour and beans and coffee and dried fruit and other grub was ruined, gone.

Just before they had reached camp the Yaqui boy had let out a short yelp. His black eyes had lighted up. "Look, señor, yonder! Old Abuelita—that Plenty Guts calf. Por Dios, that calf is big like a yearlin' already!"

Dally's face was like a grim mask carved out of dark hard wood. His voice was harsh. "Ride back to where we seen that ol' brockle faced cow and her calf. Rope the calf. Butcher it as best you kin with that machete. I'll gather what's left of our beddin' and start a fire. If we're lucky, I'll find some salt left in this mess. Or we'll eat straight beef without salt. Them young jack Mormon camp robbers ain't left us so much as a coffeepot or skillet!"

Dally Parker unsaddled and hobbled his big brown gelding. He built a big campfire and worked by the light of its blaze, gathering torn, scattered blankets and soogans. The night was black, thick with snow. The cowman wondered what was keeping the Yaqui boy. It seemed hours ago since he had heard the ketch dog sound that low, deep whimpering growl. Then heard the Yaqui boy and his horse charging through a brush thicket.

The boy and the dog came into the outer edge of the firelight. There was no fresh beef tied on the saddle, nor was he dragging the dead carcass of a butchered calf across the snow.

"That calf, señor, git away from us.... Is gone. Anyhow we ain't got no salt. That time I eat them rabbits without the salt you remember I get a bad bellyache. I guess it's better me and the Dog we don't catch that calf. . . ."

The fastest wild steer in the cow-country had never gotten away from the big brindle ketch dog. The Yaqui boy was one of the best ropers that ever popped brush.

Dally Parker knew that the Yaqui boy was lying. That he had let that pet calf get away, along with its brockle-faced, drooped-horn ornery cow mother. And here they were, cold and empty bellied, with no grub in camp.

It was the first time the boy had ever lied to Dally Parker. And for one long, gut-shrinking minute the Texan stood there, fighting down the words, the anger in his heart. It was a struggle against all the pent up fury and bitterness that he would like now to take out on the Bronco-Mormons.

There was a humble sort of defiance in the boy's black eyes; guilt written plainly on his frost-seared face.

The big brindle ketch dog shared the Yaqui boy's guilt. The stubby tail, that banner of courage and loyalty and ketch-dog guts, was lowered. He stood there beside the boy's horse, tongue lolling, shivering a little from the cold, his red eyes shifting uneasily from the tall Texan to the Yaqui.

Then the anger and resentment went out of Dally Parker's hard eyes. "If you and the dog kin go empty bellied, Yaqui, that's good enough for me. But just don't lie about things ever no more. Unsaddle and hobble your pony."

"That old Abuelita, señor, she knows the ketch dog once more. She don't run. Is almost like friends they meet after a long time. She drop a horn at the dog and he don't bother her. That Plenty Guts calf, I bet some day he make the best damn' bull you got, señor. Is not for butcher like a veal. Is genuine thoroughbred bull, that Plenty Guts. I hunt all over for one calf to butcher. I don't find. I don't like it neither about that lie I have to tell about these things."

"We'll eat us a jack Mormon veal for breakfast, Yaqui. If you and the ketch

dog kin go empty bellied, so kin I. Take care of your pony."

CHAPTER FIVE

A Texan Packs His Own Law!

IT WAS not yet sunrise when Dally Parker yanked the Solomon Valley store keeper out of bed. The Texan slapped the sleep out of the man's eyes, slapped him out of his warm bed at the rear of the store, yanked him onto his feet. His stocking nightcap had slipped off and there were little beads of cold sweat forming on his bald pate.

"How'd you like to live for a while longer?" Dally Parker's voice was clipped.

"What . . . ? what . . .?"

"Pull on your pants. Trot out there. I got a grub list I want filled."

The store keeper pulled on his pants, tucking the tail of his nightshirt into the waistband, hooking heavy suspenders over his shoulders. There was genuine fright in his small eyes.

In that partitioned-off part of the store there was a big round topped card table bearing unwashed whiskey glasses, cigarette stubs, playing cards scattered on the floor.

"Solomon Smith," said Dally Parker, "would be with me. Only I don't know which of his dozen wives he's with last night. He don't know you're the whiskey peddler in Solomon Valley. Or does he?"

Dally Parker's hand gripped the front of the store keeper's flannel nightshirt. He shook the pot-bellied man like a long lean hound shakes a rabbit.

"Solomon Smith would run me out of the country—kill me—crucify me. . . . He don't drink or smoke. . . ."

"Solomon Smith," said Dally Parker, "lives accordin' to his lights. He's a man. Trot out there and fill that grub list. And go heavy on that striped stick candy."

Dally Parker picked out what warm clothes he and the Yaqui boy might need. He piled them on the floor, along with the grub.

About an hour later Dally Parker rode out of the little village, leading two loaded pack mules. He was wearing new, warm clothing. His coat pockets bulged with paper sacks filled with stick candy.

When he reached the camp in the Mormon Basin he found the Yaqui boy skinning the hide from a fat yearling. The hide wore the brand that belonged to the store keeper.

The storm had broken and there were patches of blue sky. The ketch dog was lying down, worrying a big hunk of raw meat. The neck meat of the butchered veal.

"We're dressin' accordin' to the climate, Yaqui. And don't git one of them stick-candy bellyaches. We got work to do."

THE real work began the day when Dally Parker rode up on the big, yellow-hided Mexican steer with the tip of one horn sawed off. And from that day on it was a cattle gatherment.

They breakfasted an hour before the crack of dawn, and got into camp long after dark, cold, hungry and weary. Their faces were frost-blackened, their lips dry and cracked and black from the cold. Horses were leg-weary.

Strong, black, hot coffee. Meat and skillet bread. Warm beds at night inside a new tepee tent with the ketch dog dreaming. Dally Parker's muscles were stiff and lame from bumping into trees on wild races after cattle that tried to make a getaway. Rheumatism putting sharp pains and dull aches into his bones.

Gathering cattle, keeping tally during the short daylight hours, working short-handed in the snow and wind. Cattle were spilled and had to be regathered. But after days and nights, the bulk of the cattle were at last rounded up.

And always, beyond rifle distance, there were scattered riders, watching and waiting. But waiting for what? That's the question that bothered Dally Parker at night.

The tally became three hundred head, then three hundred and sixty-seven head. Fat, hard beef. The best damned cattle that any man ever gathered!

"When they spook, let 'em drift, Yaqui. Don't never take that ketch rope off your saddle. We got to handle 'em easy, or we'll lose 'em. Savvy?"

The Yaqui boy savvied.

"The señor says take 'em easy, Dog. Don't swing on the tails. Don't bite the hocks. Don't pull down them wild steers. It ain't much fun, but we ain't come up here for the fun anyhow. Is work."

It was work. Gentling wild cattle by easy handling took time and patience. It took everything that Dally Parker and the Yaqui boy, the ketch dog and their cow horses had.

"What's your tally now, Yaqui?"

"Five honderd and forty-wan head, señor."

"Countin' the Dun Ox."

"Countin'," grinned the Yaqui boy, "that Dun Ox. Countin' old Abuelita and that Plenty Guts bull yearlin'. Is good bull yearlin'."

The brockle-faced young bull was not worth two bits excepting for jerky. Dally Parker knew that.

"It's your bull, Yaqui."

That old brockle-faced cow, her big bull calf, and the Big Dun Ox were keeping the herd together. You couldn't spook 'em. And that meant everything right now, here in Mormon Basin.

The Yaqui boy carried no tally book. He kept it all in his head. Nor did he own a calendar. But the night before Christmas, when the cattle tally finally totaled five hundred and forty-five head of cows, calves, heifers and steers, the Yaqui boy built up the pine log fire.

There was a clear sky and a white round moon. The stars were like white diamonds in the vaulted, black velvet heavens.

"I think, tonight, señor, I take my bed outside by that fire. Then if it comes any sounds to spook them cattles, me and the ketch dog will be ready."

Dally Parker was too exhausted to even hear what the Yaqui boy was saying. He had wolfed his supper and dozed in the warmth of the campfire with a half-smoked cigarette dead between his grim lips. His work was done.

He had gathered every damned head of cattle he had thrown into the Mormon Basin. That was something that had been impossible to do. But it had been done. Those cattle were on good feed and water. Tomorrow he would start his cattle drive out of Mormon Basin, make every last one of them jack Mormons tally them cattle as they passed the general store where that pig-eyed bootleggin' storekeeper dwelt.

Past them gun-totin', pistol slingin' jack Mormon cowboys of Solomon Smith who would be there to watch. Not darin' to make a move because Dally Parker had uncovered their crooked hole card. That storeman, whatever his name was. . . . String them cattle out. . . .

Dally Parker was asleep there beside the campfire.

Then he woke up with a jerk and got the stiffness out of his long legs. He limped over to the tepee and pulled off his boots, using the shanks of his spurs that he never took off for boot-jacks. He slid in under blankets and tarp and was asleep before his head hit his warsack pillow, his six-shooter and carbine alongside him. . . .

Dally Parker slept through the long night without waking.

The Yaqui boy had his brand new gunnysack cleaned and scrubbed and ready. He put another big log on the fire, which gave enough light to outline the high tip of the tallest pine tree. This was the night before Christmas. The Yaqui boy had it all tallied in his mind.

This was the night when that red faced Tio Poleto with the white beard, driving a string team of buck deer, would come out of the night. Any time now one of the tall pine trees would light up with candle lights. The big shining red balls, the strings of tinsel and the stockings filled with apples and round candies. Stick candy like canes on the tree. And at the very top of that tallest piñon would be that big silver star shining in the night. . . .

That would be a long climb. But the machete was sharp. It would whack off that branch. The Yaqui boy would catch the branch, the tree top, in his hands. Wrap the big silver star in the red silk neck scarf. Fill the big gunnysack and climb back down. . . .

So the boy sat through the night watching the tops of the tall pine trees, while the ketch dog slept alongside his crossed legs.

The boy saw dawn break the sky. There were no shining red balls, no strings of tinsel, no big silver star at the tip-top of the tallest piñon tree. It had all been

a lie—just something to tell to a Yaqui boy. There was no Tio Poleto. There was only that gray dawn, and the cold, and today and tomorrow. But it was hard to believe that the señor would lie.

Dally Parker came out of his tepee.

"Dammit, Yaqui, git a-movin'. Wrangle them ponies while I get the coffee made. We're a-movin' camp and we're late."

Dally Parker broke the thin skift of ice at the edge of the creek and washed his hands and face. He did not see the Yaqui boy throw his new, scrubbed gunnysack into the fire. . . . Dally Parker did not know that this was Christmas morning. . . .

GETTING that bunch of cattle out of Mormon Basin, past the settlement and through the split rail lanes of Solomon Valley was going to be about as easy as walking a tight rope with a basket loaded with eggs. One wrong move, one mistake, and those cattle would spook. And riding the rim of Mormon Basin were Tug Smith and his jack Mormon brothers.

They threw their string of horses and the loaded pack mules in with the cattle. The big Dun Ox took the lead. Old brockle-faced Abuelita and her calf, Plenty Guts, were back with the drags, hooking now and then at the ketch dog.

"If them cattle booger, Yaqui, they'll spill and scatter like a locoed sheepherder's brains. You and the dog tend to business."

They neared the village, and Tug Smith and his brothers were there on the store platform. Their saddled horses stood at the long hitchrack, rumps to the storm. Tug passed a quart bottle among the others, then he hastily shoved the bottle out of sight as Solomon Smith came out of the store. The big bearded leader of the bronco Mormons was wearing a fur coat and cap and high overshoes. He stood there, scowling, hostile-eyed.

Dally Parker rode up on the point, the Yaqui boy rode on the other side of the moving cattle, riding the swing. The ketch dog kept the drags moving.

Tug Smith and a couple of others got their horses and rode into the pine timber behind the store.

Then it happened. Out of the timber charged a big spotted renegade steer. There was an empty five gallon can tied to the steer's tail and the can bounced and banged as the steer headed straight for the drive. The fat, spooky cattle stampeded.

The Yaqui boy jumped his horse into a dead run.

The ketch dog had raced around the drags and was right behind the Yaqui boy, riding up with Dally Parker in the lead of the running cattle. The wild banging of the tin can was nearly drowned out by the thunder of cloven hoofs on the frozen ground, the crashing of splintered wood as the running cattle went through the rail fences on either side of the lane.

Dally Parker sighted the spotted steer that was dragging the empty five gallon can. He yanked his saddle gun and shot twice. The big spotted steer somersaulted.

Then the Yaqui boy yelled and pointed. Dally Parker said "Godamighty!" and it was more prayer than profanity.

Not a hundred yards ahead, crossing the lane, was a small girl in a fur-trimmed red coat and bonnet. She was carrying a big doll. The little girl was going across the lane to another ranch house to pay a child's Christmas morning call.

She saw the cattle coming. Heard the thunder of hoofs. Fear seemed to paralyze the child.

The big Dun Ox went past Dally Parker like a yellow streak. The cowman yanked at his rope strap, shook a big loop in his sixty foot rawhide reata. The big Blocker loop picked up the horns and head and one front leg. Dally Parker took his dallies. The big Dun Ox somersaulted, tail over horns, and lay there.

Dally Parker turned loose his rope.

"Hold 'em, Yaqui. Ketch 'em, Dog!"

Dally Parker on the big brown gelding he called his brown pony. No quarter horse ever made better time. He had to pull up a little, then lean sideways and one long arm reached down and scooped up the little girl.

For another quarter of a mile it was a race with death. Then Dally Parker swung off on a side lane and rode to safety with the little girl as the cattle stampeded past, smashing down the split rail fences, running themselves down.

Dally Parker's leathery face was as gray

as ashes. Back there in the trampled lane lay the Yaqui boy and his pony. The ketch dog limping and crippled, licked blood from the Yaqui boy's face. The pony tried to get up, then it fell. Dally's gun put it out of its misery.

Dally knelt there on the trampled, snow-covered ground. The child stood there in her scarlet, fur-trimmed outfit, hugging the big doll, too scared to cry.

Solomon Smith rode up, picked the little girl up in his arms.

Dally Parker was picking the blood spattered, broken body of the Yaqui boy up in his rams. He carried him down the lane with its smashed rail fences, towards the store. The crippled ketch dog limped at the cowman's heels.

Dally Parker halted for a minute. His face was gray and his eyes were hard as black flint. "If the Yaqui boy dies," he said flatly. "I'm killin' them drunken sons of yourn. If you got a doctor in this valley, git him to the store right now."

Solomon Smith nodded. "The law will take care of them." His deep voice was unsteady. And he rode on to the store.

By the time Dally Parker got there with the Yaqui boy, a bearded man in shirt sleeves had a medical bag open.

"I'm a doctor. Put the boy here."

Solomon Smith had sent his sons to gather the stampeded cattle. He stalked into the store and grabbed the pig-eyed store keeper by the front of his shirt.

"I've waited too long to do this. Get out of this valley. Get out of this country. You take nothing with you but the clothes on your back, whiskey-peddler! You have broken our Law."

Solomon Smith flung the man out the door.

The little girl in the fur trimmed scarlet coat and bonnet was perched on a counter.

"Parker," said Solomon Smith, "you and your Yaqui boy and your ketch dog risked your lives to save the life of my youngest child, my little daughter. My sons will be punished. This is Christmas Day. I can find no words to tell you what is in my heart."

The doctor was smiling faintly, feeling for broken bones. He set the boy's broken arm, splint it, then bandaged cuts.

"In a few days," the doctor said to Dally Parker, "I can tell more about his condition. The fractured arm is nothing. It's the skull injuries I'm afraid of."

"Can he be moved to my house?" asked Solomon Smith. "My wife, my daughters can take care of him. Mister Parker and the dog will stay with us. His cattle will be well looked after. My sons will be punished according to the Law."

Dally Parker stood there gray-faced.

"If the Yaqui boy dies," he said. "I'll be my own law. . . . Kin you set the ketch dog's leg, Doc?"

CHAPTER SIX

The Secret of Mormon Basin

THE scattered cattle had been gathered and thrown on pasture.

Dally Parker saw the bronco Mormon leader stand his stalwart sons with their backs to the wall and flail them with fire and brimstone Biblical words. When the big bearded man had finished, Tug Smith walked over to where Dally Parker stood.

"It was my little kid sister whose life you saved, Mister Parker. If your Yaqui boy dies, we murdered him. We'll hang for it. That is according to the Law of Solomon."

There was something about it all, the stern qualities of these people, their sense of right and wrong, their unwritten law, that baffled the tall Texan.

Then there was something else that gradually filtered in through the hatred and bitterness and vengeance that clouded Dally Parker's mind like a red curtain. Solomon Smith had but one wife. She was a large woman with heavy soft white hair and kindly blue eyes and cheeks as red as the apples Yaqui had picked.

Her daughters were five in number. The little girl in the fur trimmed red was the youngest. And this was the mother of seven stalwart tow-headed sons.

Something that Dally Parker had carelessly said about the other wives of Solomon Smith caused this buxom mother to smile. The older girls giggled. Solomon Smith stroked his gray beard and his eyes twinkled.

"We let those outside think of us as they will," he said. "It builds something of a barrier around us. Solomon Smith with a dozen wives!" he chuckled. But

you are no longer an Outsider, Mister Parker. Mormon Basin is yours."

They went into the bedroom where the Yaqui boy lay between clean white sheets in a big, old four-poster bed. The ketch dog with a splinted leg lay on a rag rug at the side of the bed. The doctor was there in a chair.

The Yaqui boy's eyes were closed. His battered lips moved. "Is not like the señor to lie like that, about them trees, about the shining red balls and the candles what grow on that tall piñon. . . . The big silver star what I want to wrap up good in that red rodeo handkerchief and take to the grave of my mama and papa. Maybe burn a candle in a busted bottle like them Mexicans make candle lights to their *santos*. Is no Tio Polito? Is a lie then?

"But there was the little *niña*. The red coats. Furs on them red bonnets. Tio Polito maybe has got a *niño*, a little girl like that. Is Christmas Days. Tio Polito has left that little *niño* behind. Them cattles get boogered, is kill that Tio Polito's little girl.

"*Is* a Tio Polito. Is not a lie. . . . Is maybe that tall piñon with them things that grow on him. Only I ain't got no more clean sack."

The Yaqui boy's voice was clear. His eyes opened, black, shining, looking into the eyes of Dally Parker. The ketch dog stood with its foreleg in a splint, the red-brown eyes watching the Yaqui boy.

Dally Parker had to think fast. Christmas Day! The Yaqui boy and his gunnysack. And his own forgotten promise.

"Yaqui, there's a big pine tree down the lane a ways. Where Tio Polito's little girl come from. It's got all the trimmin's on it. More shinin' red glass balls than you could put in a sack. A shinin' silver star that will fit into the *nicho*. Directly you git on your feet, Yaqui, Tio Polito's little girl will lead you to the big Christmas tree."

The Yaqui boy's eyes were shining. "Is no lie, then, señor? Is a Tio Polito?"

Dally Parker nodded. His voice was husky. "Is no lie, Yaqui."

Because Solomon Smith had understood. Last night he had put on a red suit and played Santa Claus at the schoolhouse. Where the tall pine tree in front was decorated and lighted.

He came in now in that Santa Claus suit, with the little girl in her fur trimmed red coat and bonnet. He carried a big bag of hastily gathered gifts. Candy, apples, big stockings made of red and green mosquito netting and filled with nuts and hard candy. Solomon Smith made a big, genuine looking Santa Claus.

"Get well soon, Yaqui boy. Tio Polito has your pine tree ready."

The Yaqui boy's eyes were shining through tears.

Dally Parker was a hard man to break down. Out in the front room, he stood there, stiff backed, the legs of his pants shoved into the tops of shabby, brush scarred boots. Watching Solomon Smith shed his well pillowed Santa Claus suit.

"That," said Dally Parker slowly, "was about the whitest thing I ever seen a man do."

The hardness was gone from the cowman's eyes. His voice was husky. "We both bin wrong about a lot of things."

That Christmas Day Dally Parker ate roast wild turkey with the large family of Solomon Smith. And it was the Texan's wish, put into blunt words, that let Tug and his brothers eat at their father's table.

It was dusk when the doctor came out of the bedroom. His eyes were smiling. Tired lines marked his face.

"The ketch dog," he said, "likes jerky better than a turkey leg. The Yaqui boy has no more fever. He wants to know about the Dun Ox and his grandmother, Old Abuelita. And something or somebody called Plenty Guts. He says he is hungry like a coyote. . . ."

A WEEK later, New Year's night, the tall pine tree in front of the schoolhouse at Solomon Valley was decorated with countless red balls, lighted candles, strings of tinsel, and sticks of candy made into the shape of little canes. And at the top of the tall pine tree a great silver star glittered in the light of the biggest bonfire that valley had ever seen.

"Is too grand, I think," said the Yaqui boy, "to pick off them shiny glass balls. Them trimmin's. To me when I am kinda sick comes a dream. All about Tio Polito, and the *niño*. I know, is not no lie. That

big man, the little girl. Tio Polito is for kids, señor. I am a man now, like you, señor. Brush-poppers cowboys."

Solomon Smith had a package. It was heavy and a little bulky. He handed it to the Yaqui boy and the big man's eyes were a little misted in the winter night.

Dally Smith helped the Yaqui boy undo the red strings and layers of red crepe paper, until there was a silver star as big as a Mexican hat, made of melted and hand-hammered silver.

The Yaqui boy held the heavy silver star on his lap. His black eyes shining, dimmed by tears that welled and rolled gently down his frost blackened cheeks.

The ketch dog's stubby tail nearly wiggled. They sat there around the big fire; men, women, children. The tall pine tree with its Christmas trimmings stood straight and tall in the star-filled night.

"You will come back," said Solomon Smith, "when the apples are red again."

Tug Smith and his brothers helped Dally Parker and the Yaqui boy and the ketch dog take their cattle back to the desert country. The Yaqui boy held tightly to his big silver star wrapped in a red silk neckscarf.

Solomon Smith rode the point with Dally Parker to the edge of the desert. It was turning Spring now and the filaree was in bloom.

"A filaree year," said Dally Parker, "is a cowman's year."

They had camped back yonder at the foot of the mountains. Dally Parker and Solomon Smith had shaken hands.

"Come back," the big, gray-bearded man had said, "to your summer range."

"You got a dozen wives and you done lost count of your children and grandchildren. We'll be comin' back."

That was Dally Parker's way of saying that the secret of Solomon Valley was in good hands.

It was a month or two later when the big quart-a-day cowman whose outfit straddled the Mexican Border sent word to Dally Parker to "come and get 'em."

Cow for cow, calf for yearling calf, steer for steer, that bet was paid off.

Other cows and yearlings that wore a freshly burned YB on their hides.

"That YB iron," said the big cowman from Nogales, "is registered in the Yaqui boy's name."

"Is another Tio Polito," the Yaqui boy told Dally Parker. "Is got none of them white whiskers. But the red nose and the big heart. I tell that silver star in the *nicho* about that señor. Is good for a Yaqui boy to have too many friends like I got. Is tell the dog. Is make a prayer of some kind, with a candle in a busted bottle. For Tio Polito."

THE END

GUN-LORD OF A RAWHIDE EMPIRE—

—That was Morg Field, smooth as a tinhorn's fifth ace, pleasant as a land-agent's promise, deadly as a dum-dum carbine slug! Nobody this side of the Great Divide, it was claimed, had a chance against him! But Rip Bragaw, two-bit cowman, believed he had a system that would either spell ruin to that boom-town boss—or bring Rip and a hundred like him to fast boothill graves—and he was gambler enough to try it!

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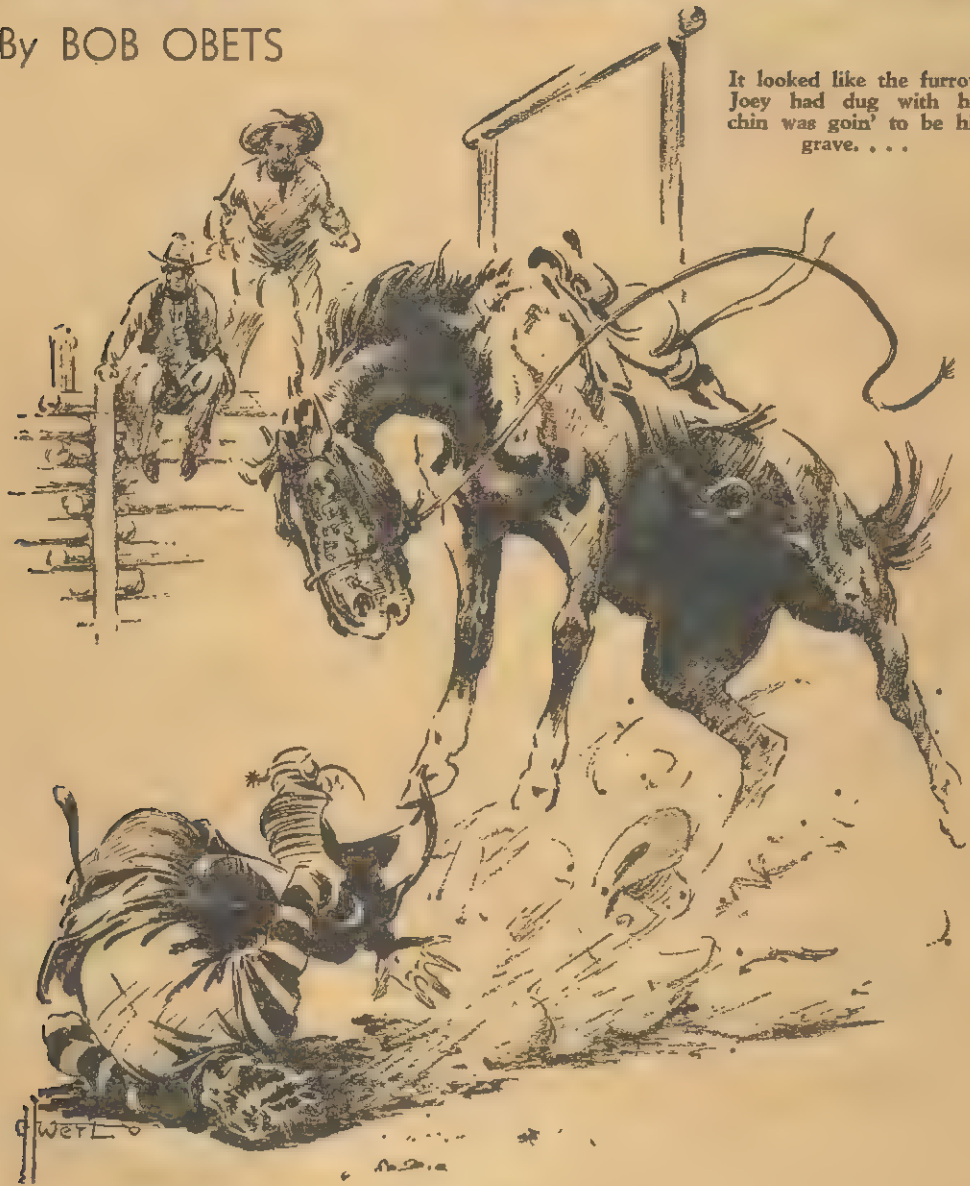
COWBOYS NEED GUTS!

By BOB OBETS



It looked like the furrow Joey had dug with his chin was goin' to be his grave. . . .

Joey was the kind of big overgrown kid that had good stuff in him—if you could only drag it out. . . . And it took that wild, desperate night of lashing wind and roaring flame to prove to the game little Buena Vista outfit just how deep his real manhood was buried. . . .

OLD VICENTE and his vaqueros had hazed in a fresh bunch of broncs about midafternoon and the man called Smith and the Singleterry twins, Skeeter and Buzz, were kickin' up a big dust inside the corral. Now and

then the fog would lift and you could catch a glimpse of Joey Allen's excited face as he spurred his old dun around the fringes of the storm.

Joey's job was to help saddle the outlaws, but he was about as handy around a breakin' pen as a busted wheel on a chuck wagon. All arms and legs was Joey, with a burnin' ambition to make a top-hand. He was a nice-lookin' kid, though, even if he didn't know how to take a joke. Maybe that was why Buzz Singleterry had started callin' him Pretty Boy.

Smith and those fire-eatin' twins were ridin' high and fancy, not cussin' a bit —the reason being the boss' daughter Annabell, who was perched on the corral poles beside yours truly, which should have been slidin' dough-gods in the oven for supper, instead of waitin' around to see which of the boys drawed the wicked-eyed roan.

Those 'busters were makin' a rough, quick job of breakin' the broncs, because it was touch and go as to whether a hundred head could be caught and broke and put on the boat at Indianola, as per contract, in the three weeks that were left.

A little sprig of a Cubano with pointed mustaches and snappin' eyes was payin' old Ben Doughty fifty dollars a round for the horses. Whilst the boss wasn't one to talk his troubles, not a man of us but knew what that contract meant to him and to the Buena Vista.

So Smith and the twins were takin' it hell-and-be-damned, to get those horses broke quick; old Vicente was ridin' the britches off his vaqueros, combin' the brush for wild ones; while the Old Man —old Ben—stayed to his bed with a busted leg and cussed his luck till the air turned blue all around the ranch house.

With that contract proddin' him, Ben had tried to show the vaqueros how to catch broncs, and his Puddin' Head horse had stepped in a badger hole. Right there was when Annabell took charge of the round-up. And the worries.

She was a real *Tejana,* that girl. If she had any weakness, it was Joey Allen. Maybe it was the mother instinct made her fret over that young would-be cowhand, but it made those red-topped twins, specially Buzz, fightin' mad. In fact, the only feller on the place that didn't seem to notice Annabell, or her frettin' over Joey, was the new rider that said his name was Smith.

He was a queer, reserved sort of cuss, anyhow. Black eyes, dark skin. Reminded you of an Indian, or a hawk. Like most cowhands in the Big Brush country, he wore a six-shooter, and while he was as soft-spoken a man as you'd ever meet, you got the idea that he'd be tough to handle, once he got riled. Where he came from, what his real name was, none of us knew.

Smith just came driftin' over the hill, said he heard in Nueces town the Buena Vista could maybe use a bronc peeler.

Ben Doughty ran his eye over the white-stockinged sorrel he was ridin', not missin' the easy way he fit his old brush-scarred saddle, and Ben hired him on the spot. Ben hadn't never been sorry. This Smith was about the best rider ever I saw—and Joey Allen was about the worst.

From the first day, by common consent, Smith had taken charge of the bronc bustin'. So it took Annabell and me both by surprise when he let Buzz Singleterry sic Joey onto that roan outlaw horse.

SMITH was holdin' the roan to the snubbin' post while the twins saddled him. Out of a blue sky, Buzz drawled, "How'd you like to tackle this one, Pretty Boy? You been beggin' for the chance to ride."

Joey sort of stiffened and looked at Smith. Smith never said a word, just watched Joey with a questionin' look in his black eyes.

I felt sorry for Joey. He was bigger than Buzz, but he didn't know how to use that fine body of his, and Buzz was always ridin' him. Sometimes the ridin' got pretty rough, too. Made you wonder what would happen if Joey once got enough of it.

"Go on, Joey," Buzz gigged him. "Show off for Annabell."

Joey cut his eyes up at her. "Damn you, Buzz, you think I can't ride him. I'll show you!" And he throwed a leg over and yelled, "Turn 'im a-loose!"

That ride reminded me of a twister I

ran into once up the Chisholm, it was that short and wicked. The roan swapped ends, rolled his belly to the sun, then come plumb apart. In between the end-swappin' and the comin' apart, Joey and the bronc parted company.

Joey dug himself a furrow in the corral dust, usin' his chin for a spade. And about then, it stopped bein' funny. That roan was a killer! It turned on Joey with his ears laid back and his intentions plain. He was red-eyed and squealin', and it looked like that furrow Joey had dug was goin' to be his grave.

Annabell and me were both in the corral, yellin', tryin' to catch the brute's attention. The twins came spurrin' from the far side, makin' a big racket and swingin' their ropes. None of us could do any good. If you never had experience with horses, you just don't know how quick a thousand pounds of bronc can kill a man.

But Smith knew, and he didn't bother to yell or swing his rope. Just picked his sorrel up with the spurs, and slammed him into the roan like a locoed thunderbolt. I'll bet that roan thought he was lightnin' struck. He rolled plumb over, and when he came up, there was Buzz Singleterry waitin' with a neat, quick loop.

Joey wasn't hurt much, just shook up a little. And when she saw he wasn't, Annabell lit into Mister Smith. Yeah! Didn't say a word to Buzz.

Annabell's eyes were gray like old Ben's, sort of a smoky gray that got smokier on some occasions, and this was one of 'em.

"Smith, you knew Joey couldn't ride that roan," she opened up, and you could fair smell the brimstone. "You knew, and you didn't lift a hand. I guess it never entered your head you might help Joey, instead of letting him get killed!"

Smith smiled at her, almost gentle. "You want me to *help* Joey?" he asked.

"I don't think it's in you!" she snapped at him.

"Maybe not," Smith said in that soft voice of his. "He has the build, and with a little confidence he ought to learn to ride. But as for helpin' him—all I can do is try."

And then Smith climbed that roan outlaw and rode him till the saddle smoked and Skeet Singleterry ran for the water bucket. When Smith lit down, his nose was drippin' blood, and that killer horse had about as much fight left in him as a empty quart of forty rod.

It was Joey Allen voiced what I was thinkin'. "Holy gee!" he said. "I'd give my right arm to ride like that."

Annabell, still rufflin' her feathers, snorted, "Foot!" But nonetheless, that young lady's eyes were mighty shiny.

And just about then I remembered my biskits.

THE work went on, and the time got shorter. Smith and the twins, absorbin' all that poundin' day after day, got so they were speakin' to each other's shadows, they were that gaunted. Every night Annabell would make a report to old Ben; he'd cuss because the work wasn't goin' any faster, then seein' how peaked she was, he'd try to grin. As for me, I wore corns on both hands tryin' to fill that hard-workin' crew with biskits.

Yes siree, got so I dreamed about rollin' out the dough-gods. But I still had eyes, and a blind man with a cup could have seen the change in Joey Allen. That young rooster took to walkin' with a strut —except around Buzz Singleterry—and every night he sat on the porch steps with Annabell. He had an old guitar and he'd sing low and mournful. Reminded me of a love-sick coyote with tonsilitis.

I wondered, of course. And come Tuesday afternoon, I ambled down to the corral and found me some answers.

Dust was a-foggin' as usual, same squealin', same slammety-bam of hoofs punishin' the ground. I didn't get there before a head and a big pair of shoulders popped up above the fence, boosted by a black outlaw that was loose at both ends and hinged in the middle.

I thought it was Smith. Then the bronc switched ends. A face shot up grinnin' like a man that's grabbed a bear by the tail and is too proud to turn loose, and I got the surprise of a misspent life.

Nope, I didn't climb the fence right then. Just waited for Joey to come sailin' over it, and was some surprised when he didn't. By the time I'd paid a nickel for

my opera chair, the show was over. Joey was climbin' back on his old dun, proud as any peacock.

"I rode him!" he crowed. "By gunnies, I rode him! Somebody tell me how that crowbait roan ever give me a tumble."

"You were ridin' too stiff," Smith explained. "Besides, you never had any idea you could ride him. Tomorrow, I'll show—"

"I bet I could ride him now," Joey cut in excited. "I bet I could—"

Well, it was sudden. And it was Buzz, you might know. He reached his leg over sly, and touched his boot toe to the flank of Joey's dun. Some horses can't stand it, and the dun was one of 'em. The way that old reprobate come apart you'd have thought dynamite went off under him, right in the middle of Joey's braggin'! Humped his back and popped the saddle, and Joey took off like a shootin' star.

Buzz watched him sail. The sorrel-topped cuss had his mouth open big, and you'd have thought he was the most surprised man around.

Joey was pickin' himself up when Buzz, kind of sorrowful, said, "Pshaw! Shook off by a bowl o' clabber. Who'd have thought that old pussyfoot would act up?"

Joey said, "Get off that horse, Buzz." His face was mighty white. "Climb down! I saw you—"

Buzz was a-climbin'. For a wag of a heifer's tail it sure looked like fun. Then Smith spurred in between.

Smith didn't speak loud, but somehow you knew he meant what he said. "All right, Buzz," he said. "There won't be any fightin' till we get this job off our hands. Joey, you catch up your horse."

Buzz looked at him. Smith's mouth twitched like he wanted to grin, and suddenly Buzz bust out laughin'. But Joey never could see anything funny about it. Just turned and started after his old dun.

I heard a saddle squeak, and there was Annabell right behind me. I could tell from her face, those battle flags wavin' on her cheeks, that she'd seen a lot of it. She called Smith over to the fence.

"Smith," she said, "a joke's a joke, but Buzz is going too far. You've sort of taken charge of the bronc-busting. I want this stopped. I don't want to fire Buzz."

"You could stop it just as easy," Smith pointed out, "by firin' Joey."

"It's not his fault! It's Buzz," Annabell flashed. "He's a bully. I wish Joey would lick the tar out of him!"

"You're just mad," Smith told her. "But far as that goes, Joey is the biggest. Buzz wouldn't be pickin' on him if he wasn't."

"He's young," Annabell said. "He doesn't know what to do. He's got nerve. Smith, you're making a rider out of him. Can't you help him in this—this other?"

"You mean whip Buzz for him? Uh-uh." Smith shook his head. "A man's got to fight his own battles."

"That's not what I mean," Annabell cried. "I mean—Smith, you look as if you could take care of yourself. There's something about you—as if you knew you could meet any situation—and handle it. That's what Joey needs. That confidence. If you could give him that. . . . Try! Will you, Smith?"

Smith didn't answer right away. Just sat his saddle, lookin' past her like he was tryin' to see somethin' 'way out in the mesquite. When he finally did answer, I thought he had forgotten Joey Allen.

"Annabell," he said, "I once saw a killin' in an El Paso saloon. Fellow named Rick Hallahan shot it out with Tod Neal. I'll never forget it. It's not pretty to see a man killed, or even beat up. But of the two men, Hallahan came out the worst, because Neal had quite a rep as a gunfighter. Now, every jackleg that fancies himself as a gunman will be itchin' to try his hand against Hallahan. He'll end up by killin' somebody else, or gettin' himself killed."

"Not unless he wants it that way," Annabell declared. "The San Antonio newspaper said Neal forced the fight on Hallahhan. The jury acquitted him in ten minutes. If Hallahan is the right sort of man, he probably won't ever have to use his gun again. Men will have too much respect for him. But unless Joey learns to stand up for himself, he'll never hold anyone's respect. Don't you see, Smith? Won't you help him?"

Smith smiled at her right slow. "All right," he told her. "If that's the way you want it, I'll try. I hope you're never sorry."

It was that same day—that night, rather—when I saw Smith and Joey pass the kitchen window. Vincente and his vaqueros hadn't come in yet, and—yeah, you guessed it. I was rasslin' up some more biskits.

I saw the pair disappear to'rds the willows, and I wondered what Smith intended doin' with the old rags he was carryin'. That's what it looked like. Old rags.

A week later, I found out. Just happened to take a little *pasear* to the creek. Well, you'd have thought the devil was whippin' his wife—him thumpin', and her gruntin'. I peeped through the willows, and there they were. Smith and Joey, I mean.

They had their hands wrapped in rags, and Smith was givin' Joey boxin' lessons—or maybe it was the other way around. For no sooner did I begin enjoyin' it than Joey landed a wild swing. Smith stumbled backward, tripped over a log, and the back of his britches said hello to the ground.

He got up grinnin'. "Kid," he said solemn, "I done run up the white flag. The hostilities has ceased. Likewise the lessons. I never been north fu'ther than Abilene, but I can tell folks I saw the bright lights for once!"

Joey was sort of mumblin' to himself. "Didn't know it was so easy. Knocked him for a loop. Knocked Smith flat."

"Yeah," I said to myself, "you—and that log!" But of course Joey didn't hear that.

I WAS awful busy the next two days, gettin' the chuck wagon greased and all ready for the drive. The boys about had that hundred head shaped up, but with only a week left, and Indianola—the way we would have to go—a good hundred and fifty miles from the Buena Vista, none of us had any time to loaf. Too many things could happen on that lonesome stretch of mesquite and live oak between the Nueces and old Powderhorn Lake.

Still, we all felt mighty good that last mornin', come six o'clock, when we pointed those horses to'rds the risin' sun and knew they were on the way. Annabell had gone ahead by stage to make sure everything was right on the other end. Smith rode in the lead; Vicente, Joey, the twins, and four vaqueros hazin' the horses along after him, and me on the chuck wagon, eatin' the dust of the drags.

Buzz, in all the flurry of the last few days, had been layin' off of Joey, and I was hopin' their fuss was over. Goes to show you how wrong a man can be. We were camped on Frio Creek, the fourth night out, when it happened.

Some of the vaqueros were whilin' away a few minutes before hittin' their blankets, by throwin' rosetas.

It's an old Mexican sport that takes a lot of skill. Vicente was extra good at it. Joey never had seen it done, I guess, because he got right interested. The younger Mexicans all took turns, then Vicente threw two or three, bunchin' the reata and pressin' and workin' the leather coils until he had it fixed to suit him.

Then he would open his hands like he was releasin' a bird, and the reata would fall to the ground in a right pretty pattern. All the Mexicans would take on, the way Mexicans will, and old Vicente would grin.

They didn't really get excited, though, till Smith took a hand and threw that double roseta that looked like two twin rose buds. Yeah, that's the sort of fellow he was—do anything, and do it well. I tell you, those Mexicans sure took on! Joey, he stepped up and wanted to try it himself.

Went at it hard, Joey did, twistin' and workin' the coils the way he'd seen Smith do. He stepped back and let 'er drop and—well, I guess you've seen that brand they call the Punkin Vine? That's what Joey's roseta looked like—about as much pattern as a punkin vine. And about as pretty.

I couldn't tell if Joey's face turned color, because there by the campfire everything was sort of red. But the vaqueros all laughed, and Buzz Singleterry bent over and pretended to trace out letters with his finger.

"S-k-u-n-k," he spelled. "Skunk. Boys, Joey's done throwed a skunkweed blossom, in full bloom! Say, Joey, how much you take to teach me—?"

About that time Joey jumped past him, aimin', I guess, to grab the reata. Buzz just stuck his foot out in front of him, and the next thing Joey was pressin' that roseta to his bosom and it still on the ground.

You ever dally a bull's tail around your saddle horn and jerk him for a somersault? Well, I did—once—to my sorrow. Because the saddle turned, and there I was—for a little while—and there was the bull. Yes, sir, Joey Allen was just that mad. The only difference was, Buzz didn't run.

But it wasn't much of a fight. Buzz, like most fellers that's spent years with their legs wrapped around a horse, was awkward on the ground. Besides, he sprinkled skunkweed on the pore feller's grave. Pore Buzz!" And he went staggerin' to'rds the creek.

That ended the incident, but it was right funny the way the men acted afterward. You'd have thought they'd cotton up to Joey for turnin' out such a scrapper, but they didn't. They just acted like he wasn't around.

As for Joey, he was the big augur, he was the big he-gobbler amongst the hens, and everybody else had better stand aside and leave him show off his comb.

It was two days later, though, in Indianola, before I realized just how big a change had come over Joey. The boys hazed those horses along so fast that last day, that I couldn't keep up in the chuck

YOU DON'T HAVE TO TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT! Just ask any of the boys who were at Pearl Harbor; find out from some of the gang in the Southwestern Pacific—Australia or the Solomons, for example. They'll tell you this is a war that's played for keeps. It's win or die for you and me and the Joneses—right here in the USA! We can win, by buying—every pay-day—*more* War Savings Bonds and Stamps!

didn't know the first principles of fist-fightin'. Not that Joey was any professional, but Smith had showed him a few things, and then Joey got in the first lick.

Knocked Buzz flat and bloodied his nose, kept on knockin' him. He slugged Buzz till he looked like a beefsteak.

I'll say one thing for Buzz, though. The redheaded young hellion didn't know when to quit. Never did yell calf-rope. Was still tryin' to fight when Smith and me pulled Joey off of him.

Skeet Singleterry, who'd been standin' first trick with the horses, rode up just in time to see the last of it. Joey saw him step down and tried to jerk away from Smith.

"Calm down, kid," Smith told him. "You've done enough damage for one night. Enough for the whole trip. We got to get those horses to Indianola."

Buzz gave Skeet a lopsided grin. "Where was you at, bud, when the lightnin' hit?" he wanted to know. "You shore wasn't with the horses, 'cause the whole *remuda* done stampeded, trampled yo' twin brother plumb to death." He shook his head, said, "Yeah, they done wagon. By the time I hit town, the horses were already on the boat—a little coast steamer called the *Jessie*—and Annabell as well as had the money in her pockets.

Yeah, that's what we thought then.

I ambled out onto the hotel gallery to take a look at the sky. There weren't any clouds; the sky looked like the inside of a brass bowl, and down at the wharves all the boats were still.

I saw the *Jessie,* ridin' her anchor a little ways out, peaceful as if she was painted there. Old Matagorda Bay was so quiet it made me uneasy.

Smith and old Vicente rode up and swung down at the hitch rail. They were as tough-lookin' a pair as you'd ever see—faces all whiskers and scratches. Shirts in tatters, and Smith's leggin's bristlin' with prickly-pear thorns till he'd have scared a porcupine.

Annabell came out the door with a leather bag in her hand. She gave Vicente some gold pieces, warned him not to let his vaqueros get too enthusiastic about their night in town. Then she looked at Smith.

"Well, Smith, we did it. Mr. Lopez

has gone to the boat now to get the money for me," she said. "You don't know how I feel. Dad—the Buena Vista—"

She stopped and Smith, right gruff, said, "If a man's land isn't worth fightin' for, I guess nothing is."

"Yes," she said, "but it's more than just the land. It's the sweat and the hope and the heartache. Dad started with a rope and a running iron, started from scratch to build up that brand. It's as much a part of him as his right hand. Smith, we've got a job for you on the Buena Vista. As long as you want it."

Smith was gazin' hard at a flock of gulls skimmin' across the bay. He said, "It means a lot to me, Annabell, that offer. More than you know. But I guess I'll be ridin' on."

About that time he saw Joey comin', lickety gallop. He said somethin' about maybe seein' her later, and he rode off with her starin' after him.

Joey pulled up his old dun in a right fancy turn. He whipped off his sombrero and sang out, " 'Evenin', Beautiful! That Spick pay you off yet? How about you and me lookin' over the town?"

Annabell went stiff as a ramrod, she was that surprised. She said, "No. I haven't time now, Joey," and she went inside.

I heard Joey say, "Huh! What you know about that?"

Then I forgot about Joey. All in the air here was a kind of high whine, and I was rememberin' that it hadn't been too long since the town was about blown off the map. . . .

WE WERE still waitin' for the Cubano with the money and the pointed mustaches, when the first gust struck. Wind! Mister, it slapped the side of that old frame buildin' so hard you could hear the foundations groan.

The fat proprietor headed for the front door, yellin', "You folks can stay if you want. I lived through one blow in this old hull, and I'm huntin' a cellar."

I looked at Annabell and she looked at me, both of us thinkin' the same thing. Those horses! Cooped up in stalls on the boat, they'd be locoed with fear.

Annabell called, "Where's Smith?"

I bawled, "Ain't seen him." But she was runnin' for the door, me right behind her.

The street was already a mess. Shingles, pieces of tin, all sorts of things flyin' through the air. Salty rain that stung when it hit was comin' off the bay in squalls. I guess everybody who could find a hole had crawled in it.

Down at the wharves it was awful. You'd see the old bay put a hump in her back, and those big waves would come roarin' like cannons. How we ever made it, I don't know. Water was lappin' at my boot tops. Loose boards, litter of every description was floatin' around. Every time one of those mountain-top waves rolled in, the wharf under us would shudder and you could hear the little boats out at the end crashin' and grindin'. It was there, out at the end of the wharf, we found Smith and old Vicente.

Smith and Vicente were starin' at the *Jessie*. You could just see her out there in the bay, wallerin' and pitchin' worse than a buckin' horse.

I was wonderin' how any anchor could hold her, when Smith yelled, "She's broke loose! She's comin' in, Vicente."

It didn't take long. With that northeast gale pushin' her, that little steamer came bobbin' like a chip on the water. She hit the end of the wharf broadside, hit so hard you could hear her timbers crack. Knocked a big hole in her side at the water line, and I guess she sprang leaks all over.

That crash must have shook a lamp loose, or slammed something through the boiler. We never did know, and the sailors didn't wait to find out. Something down in her bowels went *whoof!* Smoke spouted, and those salties came boilin' out like squirrels from a burnin' log.

The last man was the little Cubano, Lopez. He made a wild jump, missed the wharf complete, and plunked into the water. I guess he'd have drowned if some of the sailors hadn't fished him out. He was packin' five thousand in gold in his money belt, and it sure anchored him to the bottom.

The horses, penned inside, were screamin' until it made you sick.

Beside me, Joey Allen said, "They're goners! Come on, Annabell. No need to watch it."

He grabbed her arm, but she wouldn't budge.

Buzz Singleterry yelled, "What we gonna do, Smith? She's burnin' fast."

Joey put in, "Let the Spick worry about the horses. They're his. We filled that contract when we put 'em on the boat. I'll choke the money out of him!"

Smith didn't seem to hear him. The rain had slacked to a cold drizzle, but that rain couldn't help the horses. A few more minutes, and the whole inside of the boat would be gutted. Smith was shuckin' off his leggin's and brush jumper. He tied a bandanna around his mouth and nose. Then he asked, "Where's Skeet?"

"Back there in a house," Buzz told him. "Piece of timber busted a leg."

"And you here," Joey said. "Worryin' about that Spick's horses. Well, *I* ain't worryin'. And *I* ain't gettin' myself burned up, either!"

It was pitch dark now, but up forward, flames had burned through the deck planks and all around there was a red glow. The wind had settled to a low moan, so you could hear the fire cracklin' and the horses plungin' in the stalls.

Annabell said, "Shut up, Joey!" and she stepped past him.

"Smith," she said, "you can't go in there!" And then she said, "But I know you've got to. Do you want me to help?"

"They won't jump from the deck," Smith said. "Vicente—all you men—get busy rippin' out the side, there where that hole's busted."

Smith jumped and caught the deck railin'. He pulled himself up, and another man went runnin'. It was Buzz. Pretty soon, he'd hauled himself up too, and they were both inside that blazin' ship. It wasn't hard to imagine what it was like underneath the deck.

I heard Joey curse. "The damn fools! The damn locoed fools!"

I guess you couldn't blame him. I guess Joey was different from Smith and Annabell and Buzz.

You take Smith. He wasn't playin' the hero. It was just that he'd been brought up to respect a horse above everything, sometimes even above a human being. He depended on a horse to earn him his bread; and if he was sick and needed a doctor, a horse would take him there. No doubt there'd been times when a horse had saved his life. And when he went yonder to take his look at the other side the hill, he'd ride a good horse.

So Smith didn't give a hoot whose horses they were, and neither did Buzz.

No, I wasn't just holdin' my hands and ponderin'. I had a piece of two-by-four that had come floatin' by, and I was usin' it for a pry pole.

That blazin' ship had drawn a few men. Annabell and Vicente were helpin', and we were rippin' away the boards. Pretty soon we had an openin' in the *Jessie's* side an elephant could have walked through.

All for us to do then was to stand back and wait. That was the hard part. We could hear the horses still plungin', still screamin'. The heat was fierce, though luckily the fire had started somewhere up front. Of course we could have gone in, some of us, through the hole we'd made, but at any time we expected to see the horses start comin' out of there.

We kept waitin', and the little cabin on the foredeck fell in with a crash, sendin' up a bunch of sparks.

Annabell said, "I'm going in there." She took a couple steps, when there was a clatter and that hole in the ship's side was filled with a horse.

Buzz Singleterry was on him, ridin' barebacked, with a rope halter. Buzz was stripped to the waist, his shirt wrapped around the roan's head for a blindfold. Man, you should have heard the cheer that went up!

Buzz didn't stop till he reached the far end of the wharf, and the rest of those horses played follow the leader.

Smith was inside, shooin' 'em out of the stalls. He didn't come out himself until every horse that was able to travel had got clear. We heard a pistol shot, then two more. And we knew what it meant even before we saw Smith stagger out that smokin' hole.

I thought the little Cuban was goin' to kiss him. But all Smith said was, "I'm sorry, mister. I had to shoot three of them."

IT took the better part of two hours for us to gather up the horses and get 'em in a pen at the edge of town. Then we all went to the hotel.

Annabell was watchin' Smith. She said, "Smith, I didn't tell you this afternoon. Dad's getting old. He's looking for a foreman. Of course there's Skeet and Buzz—"

Buzz spoke up quick. "A couple mutton-heads like us, when there's a man like Smith around! Hell—excuse me, Annabell—but hell's fire! We'd be proud to work under him."

Smith didn't say anything for a minute. Just looked at Annabell. And all of a sudden he was smilin', warm and friendly as a good campfire on a cold night.

"I thought I'd had enough of guns and fightin' with them," he told her. "I have, in a way. I thought I could take a new name, until that Tod Neal affair was forgotten, and maybe never fight again. But I've learned something Annabell. A ranch—a man's good name—anything worth having is worth fighting for. Right now, aside from that foreman's job, there's something I want mighty bad. Something I intend to get if I have to wade through hell to get it!"

Annabell pretended not to understand what he was drivin' at. But she colored up pretty as a rose bud. She said, "So you're Rick Hallahan. I—"

"Say! Look here, Annabell," Joey put in harsh. "What you think I've been sweatin' for? Workin' my head off. *I* want that foreman's job!"

Annabell walked to the desk where she'd put the money the Cubano had paid her for the horses. She counted out three gold pieces.

"Here's your last month's pay, and a twenty-dollar bonus," she said. "You're fired, Joey."

"What? Say, you can't do that," Joey yelled. "Of all the dirty tricks!"

"Shut up, Joey," Hallahan said in that soft voice of his. "Or if you'd feel better, just take a swing. Joey, I said it once and I'll say it again: You're a lot like Tod Neal. You're a fellow that can't take a whippin', or even a joke. If you could have took it and laughed, Buzz wouldn't have ridden you so hard. But you got sore-headed, and when you found out you could use your fists, you like to have killed him.

"Joey, don't ever use a gun. Don't ever try to learn how. You'd be like Tod Neal there, too. You'd keep crowdin' your luck till you bumped into some fellow a little faster. You'd end up—dead."

Joey took a step forward. His eyes were ugly and his big fists doubled.

Smith said, "Don't you try it, Joey. Just don't do it." That's all he said. He even sounded like he was a little sorry for the kid.

Joey's eyes sort of puckered. He ripped out a cuss word, turned and hit for the door.

In the next room, Skeet Singleterry let out a beller. "Buzz! Doggone you, Buzz! Where's that supper I sent you after?"

Annabell looked at me, and I'd swear there were stars in her eyes. "Windy," she said, "I could eat a cow—if you were the one that cooked it."

And. . . . Yeah, ain't that always the way? Here I was on a vacation, so to speak, and I ended up back in the ranch kitchen—cookin' biskits!

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CHAPTER ONE

Wild Horse Temper

VIEWED from anywhere it was like a halted circus stretched from horizon rim to rim, tents and rags of tents, wagons, carts and buggies, any-

By TOM ROAN

The two mule-skinners turned, grinning, six-shooters filling their hands. . . .

thing that would roll; and men and women and kids, jackasses braying, mules and horses nickering, oxen and cows lowing and bawling. The great, great line-up was held in place by hard-faced cavalrymen whose orders were to shoot to kill if man or woman or child violated the rules.

They were there from everywhere, from California to Maine, from Florida to Puget Sound, half of them a breed of human wolves waiting only for Hell to collect their rightful due; burned-out human dregs, half-dead on their feet; others hale and hearty with gales of ever-ready laughter shaking powerful chests; the honest settler, the half-wealthy and the ungodly poor dirt-monger. There was, too, the get-rich-quick boomer, gambler and thief, sinner and saint, crimp and crook, dance-hall pick-pocket and pious

parson's wench—the devil's scrap-pile of all the carrion. . . . And, at the same time, some of the best that walked the ground.

For this was April the twenty-first, 1889, the day before the jump-off into the Cherokee Nation where men and women would find their locations. To some this was only a speculative adventure, but others were hell-bent to wrest a home from the soil and become honest citizens of Oklahoma. That one word meant Indian Land, a place still rough and utterly lawless, a wild land yet without government, and only powder and ball to destroy or protect the rights of men.

Many of them had been there for days, others were still coming. Booker T. Killdee was one of the latter, just arriving with a burly giant in a handsome black buggy with the top down and drawn by a span of coal-black horses worth a thousand dollars a head in anybody's gold.

He was a tall and sallow gentleman and ladies' man of fifty, just recently from the Ohio Valley, waxed little mustaches, great white hat, long-tailed black coat and striped gray trousers with belled bottoms half-hiding dainty-heeled Spanish boots. An enormous gold chain spanned a blood-red quilted vest of silk. A black tie blew at his throat.

Mr. William Raymond Washington Brown—Yellow Bill for short—was all gold teeth and a grin. A great suit clothed him, one that might have come from a gaudy black and white-checked horse blanket. A red tie blew and waved at his throat, and a roll-rimmed brown derby sat on the back of a close-shaved, utterly hairless head.

As usual he sat at Killdee's left side, giving the buggy a lop-sided tilt with his two hundred and eighty pounds. Underfoot and behind, the buggy was jammed with carpet bags. As the horses flung along, manes blowing, Yellow Bill kept up a constant strumming of a mandolin. His tone was good, and when he sang at the top of his voice it was no trouble at all to hear every word from a thousand yards away.

Coming from the East, Booker T. Killdee's outfit was literally coming in relays. A mile behind him, drawn by slower horses, followed four three-seater surries filled with women. Behind those vehicles trailed seven big covered wagons pulled by stout Tennessee mules and flanked by a dozen horsemen, all of them well-armed, the most of them well-dressed in that fashion usually encountered in and around frontier dance and gambling halls found a thousand miles farther west.

Killdee's golden-brown eyes saw everything in the line-up on the opposite bank of a little creek in the distance. At the moment he was interested in good horseflesh to add to his string of runners who would start the great race tomorrow at exactly noon. His gaze roved up and down the many-colored line, and then focused intently on a great covered ox-wagon.

"There's a horse for you!" He prodded Yellow Bill in the ribs with his elbow, silencing the banjo. "What a beauty!"

"Yo' hoss if you looks at 'im hard enough, Boss." The man turned and slipped the banjo back under the folds of the buggy's turned-down top and reached over now to take the lines from his employer's hands. "Dawg-gone, he *is* purty, ain't he? 'A long, lean dog for a long race,' an' he shore is long an' tall enough to fly."

"Keep your mouth shut while I talk to him," ordered Killdee.

They crossed the creek, driving at a respectful pace.

A tall man with white hair and a leg missing at the left hip stood on a pair of crutches behind a tall covered wagon, lost in the work of grooming his horse. It was a tall black, long and sleek, a thoroughbred, if Booker T. Killdee had ever seen one. The slight press of a knee against Yellow Bill's leg was a signal to halt the buggy.

"I say, old man," called out Killdee, "that's a fair-looking horse you have there."

"None better, sir!" The old man straightened, pride flashing in his round blue eyes. "That's the Cannon Ball, sir. Yes, sir, *the* Cannon Ball! Tomorrow you'll see 'im run when the guns pop for the start."

"Got your place all picked, I suppose." Killdee slowly unbent his long legs to step from the buggy and move forward.

"Yes, sir, I have—if I can make it."

The old man turned and pointed toward a spot a dozen miles away where two grassy hills fringed with grass, ragged gray rocks and low pines stood on the skyline. "Beyond that is my valley. I was there, you see, before the soldier's an' cowboys drove us out. If I don't make it, then some other man will, an' he'll be lucky. The buildin's I put up will save 'im months of hard work. We got along well with the Indians," he added reflectively. "The Cherokees was mighty decent to us."

KILDEE was not listening. His eyes had swept from the horse to a tall, light-haired girl dropping backward out of the wagon in blue calico. A beauty, that, and a prize-winner for somebody's dance floor if a man took her properly in hand.

"Daughter?" Killdee jerked his thumb at the girl as she moved on and disappeared around the front of the wagon. "Pretty!"

"*Gran'*daughter!" corrected the old man with another proud gleam in those blue eyes. "Laurel Lee, her name is. I'm Joe Lee, originally from the Blue Grass Country of Kentucky. Laurel's father an' mother didn't make it out when the soldiers an' cowboys come."

He lowered his head for just a moment, eyes staring at the ground. "They were shot in their doorway. It wasn't no credit to the Army or the big-wigs in Washington. Our lands were bought from the Indians. Somehow the soldiers claim it wasn't legal. A lot of people have been murdered out there, sir." He waved his hand toward the two hills in the distance. "Soldiers ridin' up at night, shootin' down men, women an' children, settin' fires to the roofs over their heads—"

"I suppose," the right side of Killdee's upper lip curled, "you lost that leg in the war, fighting," the lip curled a little harder, "for the Lost Cause!"

"For the delayed cause!" snapped the old man. "Some day we'll come agin." The blue eyes blazed. "The carpet-baggers, the thieves, the liars an' rats will be goin' the other way, an' there'll be fear instead of greed in their eyes when that time comes. Yes, sir, we'll—"

"Damn that!" snarled Killdee. He rated as a carpet-bagger years ago and was now feeling the devil beginning to boil in his blood. "I've got five hundred dollars for that horse, gold in the palm of the hand, right now. Take it or leave it."

"Two thousan', sir, wouldn't buy the Cannon Ball." The mild light came back into the blue eyes. "No, sir, though I thank you for puttin' such a nice figure on my horse, I couldn't think of it."

"Oh, you couldn't!" Killdee laughed, watching the girl again as she climbed back in the wagon. "It'll take a hell of a time to make five hundred dollars sweating your brains out on a farm!"

"Some people don't just farm for money, sir." Joe Lee smiled all over his face now. "There's more to it than that. Yes, sir! There's the sky above your head an' the soil under your feet. There's a sight of pleasure in the feel of the land turnin' soft an' cool underfoot as you follow the plow. The rains come an' you lie an' listen to it dancin' on your roof, feelin' sorta cozy, an'—"

"And washing the land away, yes!" Killdee sneered. "But we were talking about that horse. Seven fifty, and that's my tops."

"No, sir, I couldn't part—"

"Eight!" snapped Killdee. "I'm no man to stand and dicker when I want something, old man."

"But—but, mister," the blue eyes widened, "the Cannon Ball ain't for sale at no price!"

"*Anything's* for sale!"

"Hold, hold, don't say that!" Joe Lee threw up his hands desperately. "Why, sir, that ain't decent talk— Oh, mister!"

There—it was done! A man with the temper of a killer stallion, a temper he had never been able to control or even understand, Booker T. Killdee had struck. It was as though he moved without effort, without even knowing he was going to move. A lurch had carried him forward, right fist slashing out, left following it up.

Two blows landed, one to the point of the old man's chin, the other flat on the jaw, and Joe Lee came down, flat on his face, the crutches flying away at either side of him.

"My God, Boss!" groaned Yellow Bill. "Yore fists has done kilt another man! *Look out!*"

BOOKER T. KILLDEE never knew where that tall young cowboy came from with the long yellow hair reaching almost to his shoulders. A long black horse shot in from somewhere, and a buckskinned figure—armed like a land-going pirate—hit the ground with a harsh ring of spurred heels. There he stood, gray eyes blazing, a long clean-shaven face a mask of damnation, lips a warped gash through which strong teeth were showing.

"Try a man with two legs this time, you dance-hall gambler scum!" The younger man's voice rolled, swelled and seemed to burst as a blow itself in Killdee's face like a blast. "Let me show what I can do for that prettied face. I always tear lizard-tail little mustaches off the lips of such things as you before I'm through. Like this!"

A twisting fist smashed forward, a grinding blow that thrust the gambler bodily into the air. Down Kildee came, fine hat rolling off, his face rooting against the ground.

He came up, half-out on his feet, just enough killer sense left to try to saw for a gun in his waistband. Before his hand could close on the butt the fists had smashed again, and for the second time he was down, limp, loose and flat.

Yellow Bill had always fought for Killdee, killing for him a number of times in the past. With a quick whip, he had the lines tied to a front wheel, and then he was in the air. In his right hand was a gleaming blade with an elaborately carved hilt of bone. No less than twenty men had felt death slam through them on the tip of that murderous blade. Usually the mere whipping out of that deadly steel was enough to put a man to flight, but this time both Yellow Bill and his master had struck the wrong fighting man.

The cowboy swerved back even as the gigantic killer was in mid-air. A six-shooter lurched from the long-haired man's holster at his right hip, spitting fire as it lurched. Four shots roared, faster than a sewing machine's needle running. The first bullet smashed through Yellow Bill's hand around the hilt of the blade, the next shattered his wrist, the third his forearm, the fourth every bone in the elbow. Yellow Bill slammed back against the buggy with a howl of terror and pain. By some freak accident he tumbled into the buggy as the horses lunged, then jerked to a halt as the wheel rolled, and started rearing and pawing.

Booker T. Killdee was coming back to consciousness. Like a snake that did not know when to quit, he again pawed for the revolver under his long-tailed coat. Spiked boot heels slammed into his face, kicked out some more teeth, flattened him back on the ground, and then proceeded to do a wicked dance up and down his back.

But it was the light-haired girl that saved him as she came darting in, throwing herself between the gone-wild cowboy and the man on the ground.

"Stop!" she cried. "For God's sake, this is murder!"

"I've killed a lot like him in the past!" There was a twang in the cowboy's voice now. "No better than rattlesnakes, not half as good! What the hell difference does it make when you kill one of his kind?"

"Boy, boy!" yelled a rough-boot voice from somewhere. "Hear the ol' rattlesnake's little tail a-singin'! That's Texas Frank yo're monkeyin' with, yuh tinhorn dude an' yore yaller-toothed knife-devil! Up, boys, Texas Frank's on the loose an' goin' strong!"

One of Killdee's gunmen came galloping up—Big Red Calvert on a tall roan. Calvert was going for his guns when he came swerving in, but he never got them out of his holster. The cowboy whipped the girl behind him with a wild sweep of his arm.

Two shots roared, and Big Red was coming down, pitching forward over his horse's head, legs and arms limp and flapping like something shot out of the sky, a dead man before he could take that bullfrog plunge out of his saddle.

As Big Red Calvert struck the ground Killdee came up again, feeling as if every bone in his body was broken as he sagged back against the buggy. And now, rising,

both hands lifted like a praying blind parson, Joe Lee was getting to his feet, his old, hurt voice crying out in an echoing wail of despair.

"Stop it, cowboy, stop it!" he was sobbing. "There was no need of all the blood. I'm sorry. Maybe I said somethin' to hurt the gentleman's feelin's."

"Gentleman, hell!" roared the voice of the rough-boot. "Texas Frank never even has a' argument with a real gentleman!"

Cowboys seemed to pop up from everywhere now, many beaded and buckskinned, some like hard old Indian scouts, others booted and chapped, big-hatted and armed, all filling the air with fierce cowboy yells loud enough to bring men of their kind from as far as a voice would carry.

Within a few minutes soldiers were into it. Still dazed and sick at his stomach, Killdee expected arrests to be made now, but there was nothing like that here. Half the soldiers seemed to know the cowboy with the long, yellow hair; half called him by his name. In addition, both old Joe Lee and the girl were swinging on to him like two people trying to hold a wheel to keep it from running wildly away with itself.

"Clear out, ye bully!" A red-faced Irish sergeant leaned out of his saddle and pushed his face close to Killdee's face. "Divil take ye, ye stharted it, ye did, an' ye an' yer bloody knife-guard got the worst of it!"

"I'm Booker T. Killdee!" raged the gambler, courage coming back to him. "I have friends in the Army, in Washington, and you'll hear about me. Arrest that man and—and shoot him!"

"Shoot 'im, me eye!" laughed the sergeant. "Faith, he's only killed one man, an' he killed him to save himself. Divil take it, I saw it all. An' another thing, me foine bird, I know ye. Aye, all the honky-tonk scum both east an' west of the Missouri know ye. Clear out before I lose me temper an' spit in yer eye!"

"Drive on!" snarled Killdee to the wounded Yellow Bill. "They may think I'm licked but I'm not!"

"Licked?" roared the sergeant. "Faith, me man, yo're skinned alive an' all that's left is bloody bones an' beef."

"Three cheers for Texas Frank Morgan!" bawled a cowboy. "Morgan! Morgan! *Morgan!*"

CHAPTER TWO

"Go Yonder, Cannon Ball!"

AS USUAL, Joe Lee blamed himself for it. He always blamed himself when trouble came and he could find any smattering of an excuse to accuse himself of being a small part of it.

Men needed to hold their tongues in this half-mad country. A gun or a knife was always handy, tempers quick, and men did not merely play at fighting here. They went at it like the devil killing snakes, and hanky-pankies had no place here. They belonged east, in their armchairs beside their fires with a policeman on the corner to protect them in their weakness of soft living and soft thinking.

This Texas Frank Morgan, now—beaded and buckskinned, his dangerous Bowie swinging from a string of wampum around his neck and sheathed in a scabbard made of the skin of a rattlesnake—was a good example of what one sometimes met in the guise of a cowboy. A deadly young devil, quick to fight and quick to kill, here to raise hell today, gone tomorrow!

Joe Lee had never seen him before. He did not know where he had come from, but behind him were those rowdies, whiskey-drinking, pistol and knife-totin' wild and woolly men.

Half of them were wanted, no doubt; the other half standing a ninety-to-one chance of getting that way, and maybe stretching rope before they were done! Joe Lee did not waste words—even though it might mean trouble—when he talked to such men.

"I'm much obliged to you, sir," he bowed, "an' yet there was no need of it. I ain't hurt except for a sort of growin' soreness about the jaw, an' I'm sorry you put blood on your hands for me an' laid the sin of Cain upon you!"

"The pleasure," nodded Morgan, "was all mine. I've seen Booker T. Kildee in places farther out yonder. A man like that is no better than a snake, and I mind the killing of such no more than a snake—a cottonmouth moccasin at that!"

He turned on his heel and was gone back to his horse before Lee could think of another word to say, and the old man watched him grasp his saddle horn and swing up, right from the ground into the saddle without a foot touching a stirrup.

It should have been the end of it. It was like the slow passing of a storm, when Killdee's surries and wagons rolled up. A painted woman wailed as the dead man was lifted from the ground, and the wailing kept up at a high and screeching pitch as the wagons clattered on with mobs of curious humanity staring, and plain farmers' wives clutching their offspring to their bosoms as if some evil disease was passing through their lines.

Laurel Lee alone continued to stare in the direction the yellow-haired devil in buckskins had gone. Joe Lee did not like that. Frank Morgan was just the kind of a young rough-boot to turn a decent girl's head. Lee stepped forward and touched her on the shoulder, making her jump as if she had forgotten everything around her.

"There's more work to help your Grandma do, Laurel," he intoned. "Go on back to it an' try to forget this rash thing. May God have mercy on that young man's soul an' the useless blood on his hands!"

"You, too, have killed, Grandpa." She looked at him with a sudden flash in her eyes. "In the war!"

"In the war, maybe, yes," he nodded grimly. "There it was different than here, child."

"Blood is blood!" she told him. "Whether you draw it with a saber, a cannon or a musket. I think," she added after a moment of silence, "I am growing hard out here with the rest of the land."

"Yes," he nodded again, grimmer than before, "I've sorter been gettin' afraid of that." He looked hopelessly up at the sky. "Lord, why did we leave the Blue Grass Country!"

HE DID not sleep well when night came. The cowboy came back after the darkness settled. With him were four of his rowdies, but they kept themselves at a respectful distance. Three of them bedded themselves down, flat on the ground a few yards in front of the wagon. The young fellow moved off in the dark, a rifle balanced in the crook of his arm.

Those men, Lee knew, had taken it upon themselves to mount guard here to see that nothing happened to the Cannon Ball, for a horse like that was in danger. Any number of men might want to get to him in the dead hours of the night. A long hair from the horse's own tail carefuly tied around the coronet of the hoof and hidden by the hair would make the horse lame and throw him out of the coming race before he could really get started. And some men might not shun a chance to poison the horse.

Other people who had fast horses or mules were zealously watching them. Laurel Lee knew also what these cowboys had come for, but she, herself, was on guard. Twice during the night as Lee lay on his back beside his old Nancy in a feather bed in the wagon he heard voices, low and guarded out of respect for people trying to sleep. Once he heard Laurel laugh softly.

Several times around midnight, the distant crash of rifles came to the old man as he desperately tried to sleep while his near-blind and half-deaf old wife snored as if there was not a care in the world on her mind. Once when those guns sounded there was a yell of terror and pain. Even that did not arouse old Nancy, but it meant that the soldiers were killing men who were trying to sneak through the cavalrymen and get ahead of the others who were waiting honestly and fairly.

Tension was great here, a vast, ever-growing grip on the hearts and minds of men. Every man, every woman and child was dreaming and trying to picture what the coming day would bring. Hope lived here soaring high and desperate. The coming day would bring homes, a place to work, to create and then, die. Some might consider themselves rich before the day was done. Others would moan their lot. He who had the fastest mount would be sure to get something good, and it was a comfort to hear the Cannon Ball stamp his feet out there now and then.

When dawn did finally come the tension soared higher. Scores of people in

nearby wagons crawled from their cramped quarters with their eyes red from the want of sleep. Tempers were short and fierce. Women boxed the ears of children, men swore at the slightest thing. As soon as it was light enough Lee was out of his wagon to look over the Cannon Ball.

Laurel Lee now crept into the wagon for a few hours of sleep while old Nancy laboriously climbed down to kindle a breakfast fire. Lee saw Morgan, and knew that he had been up all night. The man had rolled himself into a blanket, Indian fashion, and was sound asleep out there on the grass while his tall black grazed nearby and a rough-looking old cowboy ranged about, gander eyes seeing everything going on.

Booker T. Killdee was forgotten as far as Joe Lee was concerned. He had gone on, yelling for a doctor, and his whole gaudy outfit had found a place in the line up the creek where his wagons and rigs could spread out, the women beginning at once to make eyes at the younger men. A few card games had been started on blankets spread on the ground, but Killdee had kept out of sight in a tent pitched for him after a doctor had been found in the line to put Yellow Bill's arm in a cast and a sling.

Every where men were rubbing horses or mules. Some with only a couple of scrawny oxen and a rattle-trap wagon or cart to their names had stripped for action before noon came, preparing themselves to run for it on their own feet.

Joe Lee stripped himself to only a shirt, a pair of light trousers and thin-soled shoes. Nary a sign of a saddle or blanket would go on the Cannon Ball when noon came. The Cannon Ball would travel light, wearing only a scrap of a bridle and carrying only his master and the master's crutches.

At eleven o'clock Laurel Lee was out of the wagon, eyes eager, body tense with the spell capturing everybody. She downed a cup of black coffee, and carried another cup out there in the grass to arouse Texas Frank Morgan. Morgan arose, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and Lee watched him narrowly as he stood talking to the girl before he saddled and rode away. He came back a short time later with the tall black bareback and ready for the run that was soon to come.

"You can't tell young folks things," growled Lee when he had a chance to talk to the girl, "but I'm sayin' now that you're young an' headstrong an' need some straight talkin' to. Don't pay too much mind to that young fella. Remember one thing: Remember he's a cowboy, an' it was cowboys an' soldiers who killed your mother an' father, Laurel."

"There are cowboys and cowboys," she told him. "Some good, some so bad they are not worth shooting. Frank's going to try to follow the Cannon Ball."

"Then," he frowned, eyes suspicious and dangerous, "you've done got far enough along to start callin' 'im by his first name?"

"Yes," she nodded, eyes sparkling with a new brand of excitement, "Grandpa, when this race is run I'm going to marry him!"

"When you do," thunder and lightning blazed in his eyes, "it'll be over my dead body! I—I'll take my ol' Navy six an' go out there an' kill 'im dead right now!"

"Look!" Her voice was a hiss, finger of one hand pointing, the other hand suddenly clamped to her bosom. "They're lining up. The sun's almost overhead!"

"In yore places!" rolled a voice that was taken up, rolled and rerolled all down the line like a shocking blast from a bugle. "In yore places. Get set! Get ready!"

A yell went up. Soldiers were tense out there in the distance, carbines drawn out of their boots. Everywhere people seemed to stop breathing. Here and there a horse was rearing, people on the ground trying to hold them, white-faced men on their backs. A jackass brayed somewhere up the line. The Cannon Ball threw up his head with a shrill nickering. The girl sawed at his bits as Lee scampered on his back.

Even old Nancy was wide-eyed and excited now. She came forward, pale as death, old sun-faded blue bonnet thrown back, eyes misty. In her worn right hand was a small New Testament.

"Just hold it in your hand, Joey!" she shrilled. "Just hold it in your hand, an' I'll be prayin' as me an' Laurel drive the cattle on. Just hold it in your hand, just hold it—"

A bugle shrilled, keen, stabbing like a knife. A sputtering burst of shots crashed in the distance, sounding like a crackle of flames. All hell yelled, churned, lunged. Women and children fell beside their wagon wheels, fell as if they were shot, all of them praying.

Streaks were going forward, the sharp splattering of hoofs growing into sudden thunder-wagons rolling. Guns behind were fired, yells, the oaths and prayers filling the air alike.

"Go yonder, Cannon Ball!" prayed old Joe Lee in a wild, half-crying, half-laughing voice. He lay low, face a straining mask of awe, hope and terror, and whipped by a flying mane blacker than a midnight without a star. "Go yonder, my *Cannon Ball!*"

ON, ON, you Cannon Ball! Don't let us down now! Lee looked back, to the right, to the left. Behind him pounded Morgan, the tall black under him a cyclone himself but not near the good horse that was the Cannon Ball. Morgan stretched at full-length on the running gelding's back to spread his weight and make it easier for the horse.

From three compass points, north, south, and behind, east, they were pouring forward. Each rider, each driver looking for something free in this great land-bag the government had opened up with flag-markers ahead to tell each grabber his location once he reached it and held on to it.

Joe Lee had only one picture in his mind—that green valley behind the break in the hills ahead, the house, the barn, the corral, and the spring wheat growing green as a blanket of emeralds from the plowed virgin soil. If he got through now, if he got back to the land, there would be no cowboy or soldier to drive him out, no rough men to shoot people down in their doorways in the dead of night.

A hard land, and a hard people! Men would die before the day was done, and some already had died before it had a chance to begin. The Cannon Ball shied before he had gone a thousand yards. Only a firm grip on the mane kept the one-legged Lee from sprawling to the ground. A dead man lay in a little wash, the look of terror still in his wide-mouthed, pop-eyed face, a carbine ball driven straight through his heart.

This man had been one of those who had tried to slip through last night, and if the rest of those shots people heard meant anything there would be other dead men here and there.

No horse to the right or left was ahead of the Cannon Ball. Booker T. Killdee and his yellow bodyguard were back there, the latter's right arm in cast and sling from the hand to the wrist. The buggy was a jolting, half-flying thing with Killdee pouring the whip mercilessly to the horses.

The country ahead would be rougher yet for that buggy, as for other buggies and carts running toward those two rim-rocked hills. Vehicles could go through the break, but just on the other side they would have to swing either to the north or south, for there was only a narrow, dangerous Indian trail leading down to the deep green valley with a creek slashing through the middle of it and a great spring surrounded by wateroaks in the distance where Lee had thrown up his houses and barns.

But there were other men who had come with Killdee's wagons and were riding. Lee recognized them back there, and they would be certain to be riding only for the man. They would go on, grabbing locations somewhere close together. When their holdings were properly filed upon they could always be turned over to somebody else, and that somebody would certainly be Booker T. Killdee, land-grabber extraordinary!

"Easy, boy; easy, Cannon Ball!"

Once he had captured his place ahead, Lee was now thinking of saving the horse all he could. He pulled him down to an easier gait, leaning forward from time to time to stroke the glistening neck from the pointed ears to the shoulder. A horse was flesh and blood, and a man who did not handle one right could kill him within the first five miles! Even with the best of treatment in such a race, the Cannon Ball might never be the same horse again after the run was over.

When they came to the slope the horse was dripping sweat from head to tail, yet

he was still keeping his place, the first animal to mount the rise with that Morgan cowboy fellow still back there, coming right along on the black.

But the cowboy was not riding as light as Lee. As if he could no more part with them than his nose and ears, his six-shooters were at his hips, and a rifle rode on a strap that lashed it to his back. Morgan was prepared for trouble if it came, and Lee was trusting it all to the honesty of men. The New Testament old Nancy had thrust into his hand rode forgotten except as an object bouncing about in the bosom of his hickory shirt.

But it was a game that was not to be played entirely with honesty. There was too much at stake here, and when good would not win now, but it was no real man who would give up without trying to the bitter end!

He was swinging it along, going it fast, when he heard another burst of shots behind him. Morgan was coming through now, and the men in the bushes had opened up on him. Six-shooters lifted, dull and reverberating above the savage sound of hoofs. That Morgan man was not going down without a fight.

In his swinging run Lee looked back, saw the cowboy reeling and rocking on the black's flying back, a six-shooter jumping in each hand. Yells tore up, and then it was quiet back there except for the hammering of the hoofs.

Morgan would come on, flash ahead.

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things were at stake there would be always men who would try to get the upper hand of their fellows—even if it meant death when they were caught in their cheating. Luck turned for Joe Lee when he was thundering through on a long carpet of grass as smooth as velvet in the pass.

A shot crashed at him from the bushes at either side of the trail. Cannon Ball lunged, slipped and came down as if he had been shot through the head. The old man left the horse's sweaty back like something greased. He plunged on, crutches trailing, and slid to a long, sprawling halt. As he flounced to his one knee and his hands, he saw that the Cannon Ball had not moved after he took his fall.

"Neck broke—God!" wailed Lee. "It ain't fair, it ain't fair! It's murder, that's what it is!"

But he could not wait! Hat gone, old white head a ball of silver, he dragged and slid himself to his crutches, managed to get up, and started swinging along as a rought burst of mocking laughter jeered at him from the bushes. Whoever had tried to kill him could be certain that he It would be fairly clear sailing now. Lee had come to a turn where he could see his valley ahead. He yelled, a big, gulping sob shaking him.

Indians and soldiers had told him that his holdings were just as he had left them, and there they stood, the barn and outbuildings on the north side of the spring, the trim little log house on the other side —just as he had looked back to view the place when the soldiers and cowboys were driving him from the valley. Down the creek to the south, perched on a flat-topped rise, were the ruins of where his son's home had stood.

There was not a sign of a rider ahead, but there was that Morgan cowboy fellow catching up.

Morgan would flash on past him, then the others would come. The race was lost, hopelessly, terribly lost. On one leg he would not be able to get anything now, and yet he could not quit the race.

He was still swing-flying along when the roar of the black's hoofs seemed to thunder right up to the back of his neck. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw the

horse's head appear, black and mean with the nose thrust out. Something hit him, knocking the wind out of him.

For an instant he thought Morgan had deliberately reached down and struck him in the back with his fist.

In one furious swing the cowboy was pulling him up, throwing him across the flying mane in front of him and holding him there like a bag of grain as the tall black pounded on.

CHAPTER THREE

Location in Hell!

LEE was yelling, half crying from sheer excitement when Morgan managed to drag him on up and let him sit in front of him. "They killed my Cannon Ball, but we're goin' on through just the same, cowboy!"

"The Cannon Ball's not dead!" yelled Morgan. "Must have been just knocked out by the fall. He was getting up when I came past, but I couldn't stop."

Cannon Ball was answering for himself a few moments later. He knew that valley, and save for running with a limp, he was coming down the rough trail, head up, mane and tail flying. In no time at all now the race would be over, but even as the two riders neared the foot of the dangerous slope four heavily-armed, running figures of men on foot took shape more than a mile ahead. Lee stared at them.

"They're slip-throughs!" he cried. "But they're goin' to beat us to the markers."

"But they won't keep them!" The cowboy snarled through his teeth.

"We worked hard here, hard!" Lee was gabbling like an old woman, eyes wide. "By any honest law of man the land belonged to us. We bought it an' paid for it. I swear it, an' I showed them my papers. The soldiers said I had no right to buy. But—but they can't do this to us, now that the land is mine for the second time!"

Morgan thundered on, grimly silent, eyes bitter and hard as he watched two of the men straight ahead. He fired ugly glances at the other two who were bearing toward the marker in front of the ruins where Lee's son and his wife had erected their house and little barn, only to have it burned atop of their bodies in the doorway.

"There, there," moaned Lee, "they've got to the marker!"

Morgan was still silent, merely staring. The men ahead Morgan recognized as mule-skinners of Booker T. Killdee's big wagons.

They turned, grinning; six-shooters filling their hands. As Morgan neared them they started yelling and waving for him to keep on going. He rode right on up, pulled rein, and allowed Lee to slide to the ground.

Both men had swung out, a black Colt waving in either hand. "I know yuh! Yuh killed Big Red, but yuh ain't stoppin' nothin' here 'cept a bullet! Flop back on that hoss an' get goin'!"

Morgan's voice had a grinding slur. "You two didn't get here by fair play—"

The drum of hoofs cut him off. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw a corporal and seven troopers galloping forward from the thick line of timber along the creek.

That seemed to strike the two bearded men as a blow. They looked at each other quickly, and were suddenly holstering their six-shooters as the corporal and his men came galloping up.

The corporal spoke, glaring at the two ruffians: "Where's yore wings?"

"Wings?" The hare-lipped man's mouth flew open. "Why—why, I don't follow yuh, soldier. I—"

"No, you won't follow me!" snapped the corporal. "Yuh two will walk ahead of us as prisoners, an' the general will probably order yuh shot. Yuh birds slid through the lines last night, an' now yo're goin' out an' one of these men takes over the location."

"Here!" Morgan thrust a six-shooter into the surprised Lee's hand. "The Army's on your side. Protect your claim. I'll get the next one, because you know what that pair over there are going to get."

He swung back on his horse as the Cannon Ball came up, nickering to the old man, and galloped away, with the men ahead staring at him and the soldiers behind him. For a moment it looked as if there was going to be powder burned when Morgan dropped off his horse.

"Save your lead!" he snapped. "You see what's happening behind me. You men sneaked in with that pair over there,

and the troopers will soon be here to take charge of you. They said something about the general ordering your kind shot—just as some were shot last night. Better tell me who you want notified of your deaths before they get here. They might not give you time."

"Dammit, he's right, Bub!" gasped one of the men, staring at six of the soldiers already heading toward them. "Here they come, an' two's bringin' along Lige an' Bullard. Let's get outa here fast! But—but," he glowered back at Morgan, "yuh ain't seen the last of us!"

"Nor Booker T. Killdee either!" snarled the other man. "Let's get a-goin' —damn 'em all!"

They wheeled, heading back toward the creek as hard as they could run with the six troopers changing their course to follow them. After that there was no time to think of such people. Other riders were coming into the valley, tearing down the slopes on horses and mules, the yells, the noise of hoofs and curses filling the morning.

Morgan stood beside his marker with a six-shooter in his hand as the first rush swept on past him, then he staked out his horse, and stood looking at Lee in the distance, a proud man now beside his Cannon Ball while he stared at the ever-growing rush of humanity and animals, coming as if terror-stricken and running from a cyclone.

For miles in either direction it would be like this, half-mad humanity on the run as if trying to kill the animals under them. Men on horses and mules passed first, with them no less than five racing sulkies, one of them flying along like a jumping spider behind three horses strung out one after the other. Then came the buggies, the carts and, after what seemed an ungodly time, the wagons with fast teams.

Many blood-spillings simply had to come in excitement like this, and here and there in the distance fist- and knife-fights started, often ending only when guns crashed and men died fighting over the markers. But more soldiers were showing up, blue-clad cavalrymen galloping here and yonder in a near-hopeless attempt to keep order.

Into it came Booker T. Killdee, Yellow Bill moaning and rocking in his seat. Killdee was still whipping like a madman as he turned up the valley and finally flashed out of sight, his running, half-dead horses slinging frothy ribbons of sweat.

Long after the sun was down and twilight beginning to settle over the land, Joe Lee's great old wagon was one of the last to show high up there on the slope, its patched canvas top a swaying cloud with two white-faced little milk cows and a solitary calf trailing dolefully behind on lead ropes. Morgan watched the wagon slow-wind on down the bends.

Little fires and smudges of smoke were already rising in all directions, themselves markers to tell loved ones and friends driving slow wagons and carts where runners had found their locations, but many of those wagon and cart-drivers would not find their proper places until morning. Some might not find them for several days—and a number would find only a dead man waiting for them when the mad journey came to an end. Such things could not be helped. Greed would fight on somehow, and it was here, glaring out of blazing eyes, ripping off the ends of cursing tongues or flashing from the muzzles of guns. Wolves would be wolves, and the rising morning sun would reveal murder done during the dark hours, regardless of the soldiers. . . .

To hold a claim a man still had to stand over it with a cocked gun. Frank Morgan was not going to budge an inch—not until

LET'S QUIT KIDDING OURSELVES!

It looks like a long war, a tough and bitter struggle for the survival of you and me and our families! Defeat means our wipe-out as a Nation—a meagre, miserable existence as slaves under the ruthless rule of Axis gangsters. Buying U. S. War Savings Bonds and Stamps will help insure our victory and freedom. Buy them every pay-day!

a couple of big freighter wagons rolled up the valley and his belongings were dropped off by men hired several days before to take care of them.

UP THE valley, on a section of land just a mile above Joe Lee's holdings, Booker T. Killdee had not done so badly by himself. Men ahead of him—sneaked through the lines the night before—had made their grabs, holding off honest riders with their guns and driving them on.

This place was on a great rise along the creek, and as soon as it was clear that Killdee would reach that spot within a few minutes, the two men at the location had darted on brazenly to try to grab another location.

The fine buggy horses looked like they had been gutted. The near horse fell in his harness, lying there with neither Killdee nor Yellow Bill giving any attention to him. The excitement was still too high for a man to bother about a horse, even a valuable one. Professional gunmen had scored heavily, losing a slice of land here and there, but such little matters as that could be taken care of at a later time, and Killdee knew it.

"I'll have it all, from one end of the valley to the other!" he cried, his face still swollen and his gums feeling like boils in his mouth. "We hold more now than I dared to hope we would!"

Right in this valley would be the capital of Oklahoma Territory. Booker T. Killdee's heart and soul were set on that. There would be a lot of competition, he knew, but he would have help.

Rag towns, wagon towns and hut towns would go up everywhere. Fortune-seeking men all over these newly opened lands would all be sparring for the same thing. But a man with political pull who owned or controlled a few sections of land where the capital was decided upon would become a millionaire overnight.

A number of gunmen soon appeared, riding slower horses and mules that had no chance in the race. At once Killdee sent them back, scouting for the surries and his big wagons. When night fell a camp was already being thrown up and fires lighted while gunmen still clung to choice places in the distance, and more of his picked men made ready to seize others under the cover of darkness.

By morning streets were being laid out. Men were at work cutting timber along the creek and snaking the logs to the top of the rise, and gunmen rode out to locations beyond the valley rim to hire extra help, yokes of cattle and teams of mules and horses.

Tall trunks of trees were set up at either end of the "town" as gateposts. Strung across them, painted two weeks before in glaring black letters on a background of dazzling white for this very purpose were long signboards that announced to all comers that this was "Kildee City, the Coming Capital of Oklahoma, the Metropolis of Golden Opportunity."

Houses rose steadily. Extra help had not been hard to find, for many of the people who had grabbed locations were down to their last dollar, and the chance to earn money at once was a God-send. Money would buy farming tools, grain for hurried plantings, and hold the wolf of hunger from many hard-bitten families. So, leaving their wives and children to hold their claims, men hurried to Killdee City. Their women were hardy. They could live in their wagons and rude camps for a time, and some of them could start the spring plowing.

As Killdee City leaped into being, the name and the generosity of its founder leaped with it. His huge general store carried supplies enough to fill every want of the settlers for miles around. Any old thing with a good claim could obtain credit, providing he signed certain papers, and into the town flocked the usual hordes, more women, more gamblers, gunmen and strutting, ever-hungry politicians sugar-tonguing for the votes. There was yet no government, and none would come for almost another year, but hopes were high.

Before a month had passed, lawyers were slipping in to set up their shops and be ready for the fattening flocks. While they waited for their chances to try criminal cases, they found agreements and potential transfers of land to be written up—instruments of legality to be upheld by judges of the coming courts—that at once started placing a draw-string around the town.

Booker T. Killdee might have forgotten

that certain matters had not been settled to his satisfaction. Big money was at his door, rolling into every drinking dive, honky-tonk and gambling hall.

People erected nice little log houses along the side streets, they made sidewalks of gravel from the creek while he still owned every foot of the land, and would own in due time no less than a dozen more square miles surrounding it, except for the Morgan and Lee claims.

It was those Morgan and Lee claims that rankled him to the bone, yet he held his fire, knowing that the land was being improved every day and the time would come when he could move boldly in and take over.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killdee City Warriors

BECAUSE they kept to the timber and brush along the creek, Frank Morgan did not at once see seven of the eleven men who came down the valley that morning to settle matters.

He was on the roof of his unfinished store, nailing split boards in place. Three half-breed Cherokees were plowing oxen on his claim a quarter of a mile away between the new houses and the creek. The hint of rain was in the air, and he was intending to finish the job before the sun dropped beyond the valley rim.

Since finding a trail to follow with the Lees, Frank Morgan was becoming lost more and more each day in the realms of what true happiness could mean to a man. At times he was not himself at all. Each night found him with the Lees, a mooning man in love, too engrossed to think of his enemies.

Life had never been like this. Born in a covered wagon one dark night just before dawn on the Texas Trail with a battle between white men and redskins roaring around him, he had come up the rawhide way. He had killed his first Indian before he was twelve, and a notorious outlaw on his fifteenth birthday. It had been like that down there in the remote sections of far-flung Texas where hardy men and women tried to raise cattle in a country teeming with hostile reds and whites.

A boy learned to ride and shoot as soon as he was large enough to shinny up a stirrup and clutch a saddle horn, and all the trails to manhood led through rough and rowdy men, decent outlaws and outlaws gone mad-dog against the world—a wild and lawless land where men were men at sixteen, and only the strong came through.

Men with any streak of decency were ready to forget the quarrels. Homes were going up, some a bit at a time, often by the light of a lantern or a sputtering and burning pine-knot when a hard day's plowing in the furrows came to an end.

Others appeared to leap, just as Killdee City had leaped, but they were without Killdee City's gunfights, its cut-throat prices and crooked games of chance running full blast in every dive.

The most of the people in these new settlements wanted no part of Killdee City. Any number of them—shunning the robbery prices of Kildee's general store—drove their teams for miles to bring in the few necessities of life. This store would end all that.

A distant hammering on an anvil caused Morgan to look up from his work. It was Joe Lee, pretending to be sharpening a plow-point in order to attract attention. Morgan stared at the man, then saw Laurel come out the back door of the house.

She stood facing him, right arm at her side, the other up and pointing. He glanced toward the creek, then up the valley, and saw the four heavily-armed gunmen coming at a slow gallop and a little cloud of dust behind them.

It was a good time to catch a man alone. Morgan's Texas friends were rarely around until late in the afternoon, and there would be no witnesses, no tough crowd to fight.

Daily killings were still going on among the fight-hungry. They amounted to no more than drops of water, when it could be pointed out that so-and-so was beaten on the draw after starting the fight. People would not take sides in such killings.

Forewarned by the hammering on the anvil and the pointing of the girl, Morgan started for the ladder to get down from the roof.

His six-shooters were below, hanging from one of the shelving pegs in the wall,

and a Winchester stood on the new-planked floor. Before he could reach the ladder, rifle balls were whistling around him from southward, splintering the piles of boards and filling the air with bits of flying wood.

It was a neat way to kill without giving a victim a ghost of a chance to even start an argument. The four men coming down the valley were simply decoys to hold the intended victim's attention.

They had hung back, waiting for the seven men going down the creek to reach a place where they could cut close to the new buildings by working their way up through a dense little pine thicket.

The four men were still a good quarter of a mile away. In a few moments they pulled rein, looking innocent enough but halting to watch, and be able to tell their own tales of the fight in case settlers took this case too much to heart. Not one of those four would pull a gun or say a word to indicate that he was even interested in who came out as the winner of the fight.

Morgan knew that old trick. Caught like a fish flipped out on high, dry land, splintered boards still flying around him, he stumbled before he reached the ladder. A violent pain shot up from his left ankle as his foot slipped through a knot-filled length of planking, and he was down, held there for a few moments like a man with his leg caught in the jaws of a giant trap.

"He ain't got a gun!" one of the gunmen yelled.

Flying back in their saddles, agile as excited monkeys, they came pounding forward. Morgan was still trying desperately to get that leg out of the hole. He reached for a hatchet, got it, and started chopping.

"Pull up an' let 'im have it!" bawled one of the approaching horsemen. *"We've got 'im!"*

Up close now, they were again piling out of their saddles, rifles coming to their shoulders when a second knotty plank parted under the furious strokes of the hatchet.

Now there was nothing to do but slide on through, but even as Morgan dropped, bullets were again tearing at him. They followed him on down, ripping through the unchinked logs even as he struck the floor. There both feet buckled under him, and he went down sprawling, crippled in both legs now, and a good twenty feet yet away from his guns. . . .

"THAT last bust got 'im, boys!" It was Long Ace Pert who let out the yell.

"Keep lettin' 'im have it!" snarled another lanky gunman by the name of Mark Beevey. "We come here to make damn shore we do get 'im. Swing up closer! Pour lead through them cracks. We—"

A shot had cut him off, a ripping red gash of flame leaping out of one of the unchinked cracks in the south end of the new store. Beevey stiffened, arms dropping against his sides, his hot-barreled rifle slipping out of his hands.

Another gash of flame lurched from a crack, and a man beside him grunted and fell. Beevey shook his head, mouth sagging.

Another gunman grunted and spun around on one heel to join him in the death plunge to the hard ground.

"Take cover, damn it!" snarled Long Ace Pert. "He's got the edge on us behind them logs!"

He leaped for his saddle, the horse snorting and rearing, excited by the sudden smell of blood. His hand touched the saddle horn, but that was all. The deadly rifleman beyond those newly-cut logs was not missing a shot.

Stung heart-high, Pert wheeled, body buckling forward from the waist. Somebody else grunted, fell with a dying oath. Then hoofs drummed, horses scattering in every direction.

Ace Pert did not hear anything else. His eyes closed and life flickered out of him, making him one of the four dead men on the ground while the three remaining gunmen—hung like clutched spiders to the sides of their saddles—were riding hell-bent for a getaway.

JOE LEE was sobbing like an old man with a broken heart when he came dashing up with Laurel behind him on the barebacked Cannon Ball.

"I told you, son, they'd give us just time to get things in shape for 'em to take over. Your Texas friends have warned you, too. Now we'll have all of Killdee City on our necks!"

Morgan still lay on the floor, one ankle

certainly broken, the other feeling like it, and rapidly swelling in its boot. The four men who had halted to watch the fight had fled without firing a shot as the others who were left alive had turned tail.

"Get on the Cannon Ball, Frank!" The girl tried to drag him to his feet as he sat there looking at them.

"Ride for it?" He looked at her as if he did not know the meaning of the words. "Why, no, I won't do that, honey. This is my place, this is where I'll stay."

"You lis'en to me!" Joe Lee caught him by the shoulder, shaking him. "There's soldiers, they say, west of us. Nary one's been seen in these parts for days on end, but they may be some help, they may come. . . . There ain't no other law, Frank. We're here, on our own, forgotten by God an' man, left to root hog or die—"

"Look, Grandpa!" The girl was staring out the front doors. "Soldiers!"

Eight riders had appeared up the valley and were coming down at a slow gallop. Morgan dragged himself closer to the door to look at them. His eyes narrowed when they were still a mile away. One wore the full uniform of a sergeant, another a private. Each of the remaining riders wore some part of an Army uniform.

"Honey," Morgan looked at the girl, voice flat, eyes narrow, "it's you who'll ride this time. Get on the Cannon Ball and fly. Head for the first long-hair Texan's claim. Tell him the showdown's come, and then ride on to the next one. You won't have to waste time explaining. They'll know what you mean. They'll know before you get to them. A woman coming fast on a fast horse means there's trouble in the wind to any damned Texan who was ever born.

"I don't know what to tell *you* to do." He glanced up at the old man. "They'll want you out of the way along with me. Maybe Laurel had better take you as she runs for it. They won't burn your houses —not as good as they are! Booker T. Killdee can use every one of them. It'll save building when he has—"

Gunfire in the distance stopped him. The three half-breed Cherokees had kept to their jobs, under strict orders from Morgan when he hired them to keep themselves out of trouble. The girl looked out the door and saw what was happening.

A swarm of gunmen had broken cover from the timber and brush along the creek. The half-breeds were unarmed, and the gunmen were mercilessly opening up.

One man had already dropped behind his plow. The remaining two had turned to run. One after another they were knocked off their feet, their yokes of oxen halted behind them and staring dumbly, plows still buried in their furrows. Morgan got to the doorway on his knees in time to see the last man fall.

"Get going, honey!" He reached up and gave the girl a push. "The long-hairs won't turn you down!"

The girl was out the door and gone a moment later. Up she leaped to the snorting Cannon Ball's back. The "soldiers" were in shooting range now, and as the girl wheeled the horse Morgan saw a carbine's barrel jerk up in the hands of the man in the sergeant's uniform. The butt of a rifle leaped to Morgan's shoulder at the same time.

"Don't, Frank!" wailed Lee. "When you kill a soldier you're settin' yourself to fight the whole United States Army!"

The rifle blazed in spite of him. The carbine in the distance blazed almost at the same time, a round little ring of smoke puffing from its muzzle.

The uniformed man's shot had gone high. Now the man was stiffening in his saddle. The carbine slid from his hands. Body slowly twisting, he turned to one side. His horse swerved, and down he came.

"Lord!" whispered Lee, "that's shootin'."

Hoofs raced, sounded like drums in Morgan's ears, telling him the Cannon Ball was going away. A yell followed from the direction of the creek. Again the rifle in the doorway churned. The second full-uniformed man galloping forward suddenly screwed to one side in his saddle, his horse making a quick jump to one side that pitched him on to the ground.

"Lord, Lord," groaned Lee, "look at 'em come! Look at 'em come! All Killdee City's headin' this way, son. Dammit, where's my rifle an' some shells?"

"Back there," said Morgan, blazing away again. "In that big chest against the wall."

CHAPTER FIVE

Gunsmoke Showdown

BACK and out of danger as usual in such matters, Booker T. Killdee sat the saddle of a tall bay in the timber up the creek. Yellow Bill was at his left, his right arm still in a sling.

It was murder in the distance. All of Frank Morgan's houses were gradually being surrounded. The gunfire rolled and jerked. The eight men posing as soldiers had been reduced to four. Not a man who had reeled out of his saddle got up to fight.

"I told the damned fools he was deadly!" Killdee's lips were white, voice jerky. "They're finding it out!"

"They can't help winnin', Boss." Yellow Bill was cool. "Before you know it, it's goin' to be over."

But it was not that easy. For that damned girl was gone, riding like hell after yearlings, face buried in the flying black mane of the flying Cannon Ball. Killdee had watched her reach the west side of the valley, had watched the tall horse go up the slope like a gleaming black bullet and flash out of sight.

He knew where she was going. She was out to find Morgan's long-hair mob. And she would find them, but it would be too late. When they got here it would be over—and all hell swarming to meet them in the teeth!

Yells down the valley kept his eyes glued on the fight now. Men were charging the new store from all sides. Up they shot, rifles rolling, six-shooters thundering into it. It looked like it was going to be a clean sweep, a perfect wipe-out, but Killdee swore when he saw the mobs turn back.

"They's up ag'in a shore-nuff shootin' fool, Boss." Yellow Bill was getting worried and mopping perspiration with his left hand. "I guess they got a job."

"The two damned men that I want are in that store!" Killdee's eyes were as hard as two bullets. "If they don't get Morgan and Lee, I'll cut every one of their throats!"

Yellow Bill's lips were trembling. "But somebody said he was the fightin'est man in britches. He shore ain't foolin' 'em. Must be more men in that store than you think. Look, they're tryin' at 'im agin! This time—"

Again a charge was going forward, men hanging low over their saddles. This time they were using more sense about it. As they charged in close, not even trying to fight, men dropped to the ground, letting their horses go. In mobs the rest fell back, horses bawling and dropping, dead men falling.

This thing was costing blood, but it was going to be worth it. The more men Morgan and Lee killed, the easier the tale of the fight would be to hush up. And more than half of those fools carrying on the fight were drunk, made that way before they left Killdee City so that they would have just sense enough to get themselves killed.

Now those men who had left their horses were opening up from behind any cover they could find; but the cover was scant. In the hot fight the men were making a desperate attempt to turn back, some of them dragging themselves like sick alligators, some getting up to run only to drop before they had gone a yard.

Killdee swore, white froth on his lips. Time after time in more than an hour's battle he saw what looked like an end of the fight, and each time he was fooled.

"Look yonder, Boss!" Yellow Bill jerked up his left hand to point. "Them smoke puffs, yonder in that little gully! Somebody's behind them, 'twix them an' Lee's house!"

"Damn it!" roared Killdee, suddenly standing in his stirrups and startling his horse, "that's old man Lee's wife shooting into the boys from behind! Come on! We'll fix that she-cat!"

He led the way, all thought of caution gone. Out into the open he shot, Yellow Bill riding furiously at his heels. Horses racing, they were passing the Lee houses when a wail of terror from Yellow Bill made him start snatching to a halt.

"Lord, Boss, look yonder!"

Gripping his horse with a tight rein, Killdee sat there fascinated. It would have been a sight to make another man cheer.

Figures that seemed to be dropping out of the sky were coming over the western rim of the valley—riders, buckskinned, half of them dog-dirty, wild hair flying, gunsmoke lifting.

"Two, four, six," Killdee started to count mechanically, "eight, ten! Dammit, they're not all long-hair men—"

Yellow Bill's voice broke in with a savage gulp. "I'm hit! That ol' woman—got me!"

Killdee turned, looked. A bonneted old face was looking at him, eyes rimmed with thick glasses over the telescope sight of a long buffalo rifle!

Killdee started on, zig-zagging his horse, a Colt now in his hand. Yellow Bill was dying as he plunged from his rearing horse behind him, and lay there on the ground, propped to one elbow.

Something sang in his ears, something that made him pull up. Yells and oaths ripped through the air in the distance. All his men were falling back, running.

"Look, Boss!" It was Yellow Bill's last speech, but even with death upon him he was trying to pull Killdee out of it before it was too late. "Them's real Army men a-comin' now. They'll get mad about you dressin' the men up like soldiers."

Yes, real Army men—behind those long-hairs! Behind them was that damned girl on the sweat-dripping black, her hair down, wild and blowing in the wind.

In sudden terror, Killdee whirled his horse. As he whirled the old buffalo rifle in the gully churned, joining its heavy report with the sharper crack of a rifle spurting fire and lead from a crack in the store. A-heel of those reports a bugle sang again, sharper, closer, notes ringing clear. Killdee felt two deadening jerks saw through him. Before he knew it the ground was flying up to slap him in the face.

* * *

It was a long time before Booker T. Killdee opened his eyes, men all around him, some buckskinned, some dog-dirty, some in blue, faces grim as devils. One side of the crowd opened. Two brawny Texans came brushing through the crowd, hands locked to make a pack-saddle. On them sat Morgan, the girl behind him, hand on his back.

Something was wrong with Morgan's feet. Both legs were in bandages to the knees. A wild burst of cheering went up.

"Thanks, Morgan," said a voice that sounded far, far away. "This helps a lot. His kind are getting what's coming to them. The general sent eight to Fort Smith to be hanged just four days ago. Fall in! We're riding for Killdee City to clean out that mess."

Killdee shuddered, last breath long and deep, as the blackness came down. Another cheer lifted, louder, wild enough to arouse anything. . . .

Except the dead, was Killdee's last thought. . . .

THE END

Adventure Starts the New Year . . . Packed With Thrills!

It was the bombing of Cavite that brought that damn cat on board the *Perch*. We'd been a lucky submarine till then. . . . That's the way Commander Charles T. S. Gladden's—"THE CAT AND THE PERCH"—slides down the ways for a voyage through the China Sea, full of hell and Japs.

"They got clean away," the little Filipino corporal said, grinning through his bandages. "I hope they managed to get a gun." . . . That's how T. F. Tracy's novelette—"SOMETHING TO SHOOT AT"—begins, to the accompaniment of wailing sirens and the crack of a sentry's rifle.

It was all very well for the Old Man to declare he would never give up the ship. That wasn't the question—the ship was giving up Captain Scudder. You could feel it going with your ankles. . . . That's the opening of Richard Howells Watkins'—"A SHIFT OF CARGO"—the stirring account of a freighter's unconvoyed run to the Caribbean.

Plus: "CIMARRON CROSSING," a gripping yarn of the men who work hot wires; "BLACK BILLIONS," an amazing story of the Central American jungles; the thrilling conclusion of "TO THE LAST MAN"—and the usual features found only in *ADVENTURE*. This great JANUARY issue goes on sale DECEMBER 9th!

Adventure 15c

His bullet caught the man in the chest. . . .

BRASADA MAN

By FRANK BONHAM

It was typical of Mitch Hawkins, brushpopper, to hold his loyalty to his long-lost friend above his love for the ranch girl they both worshipped. . . . But when that gaunt, black ghost returned with the blood of murder on his hands, it was up to Mitch to decide between them. . . .

LIVING so close to Dorie, seeing her every day and learning every tiniest facet of her nature, it was inevitable that Mitch should eventually come to love her. It was unfortunate, because he was one of those sober-minded, bashful men who make the best husbands but seldom get the chance to prove it.

It was doubly unfortunate, because Dorie Talbert already had a husband somewhere.

Just where, even Sam Houston's war department did not know. For two years, Mitch Hawkins had fought at Jess Talbert's side in the late Mexican War. But that was a year and some months past. They had parted company when Captain Talbert was dispatched into the wild can-

yon country of Nuevo León to clean up the last of the guerrillas. His company was long back—Sheriff Biddle, of Palomas, had been with him—but of Jess there had come no scrap of news since he disappeared one night from camp, near La Gloria.

Six months ago the war department had informed Dorie Talbert that, inasmuch as no trace had been found of her husband, he must now be considered officially dead. . . .

Tonight Mitch was late in returning from a cow-hunt in the trackless green jungle that hedged the little ranch-house and ocotillo corrals about. He could smell coffee and the sharp spice of fried green chilis, and knew Dorie was holding supper. Yet for another fifteen minutes he found things to keep him outside. He was flushed and breathless. He had made up his mind he would speak tonight. And, so help him God, he would!

He had kept his promise to Jess Talbert. He had hunted up his nigh-worthless *brasada* ranch, hidden in the chaparral wilderness that makes a land of mystery and scratched hide out of the country below the Big Bend; and with the assistance of Talbert's wife and an aging Mexican couple, he had kept it going, while he waited for Jess to return and take over.

Land he had cleared; fifty wild longhorn outlaws he had busted out of the brush and marked with the rangy Fence-Rail brand.

Mitch Hawkins realized he must either make a strong thing out of this sweetly-hurting cord to bind him forever to Dorie, or he must cut it and ride out of here never to see her again. So tonight he would speak.

Mitch gave Brushpopper such a currying as must have embarrased the tough, brush-scarred little horse, unused to coddling. He found other chores to prolong the moment. Cristobal came to the gate of the cactus-wand corral and stood looking in.

He said: "The señora say, is ready the supper."

"Coming," Mitch grunted.

Mitch started for the house, the heavy ball in his stomach making him slow of foot. He stood himself beside his remembrance of Jess Talbert and saw how poorly he measured up—slow, awkward of speech, with no more dash than a bucket of slops. Completely inarticulate; there wasn't a pretty speech in his head.

Once Mitch had been paid a compliment by a rancher slightly in his cups. "Mitch is the best damn' brushpoppin' cowboy in Texas; but the wust damn' man to talk I ever heard. Talkin' to Mitch is like conversin' with your shadow." So that even this one hank of praise had a moldy side to it.

But Jess, now. . . .

There was a man for the ladies—or the men!

A man who abhorred idleness and loved a fight. A soldier who was happiest when the war-cymbals crashed the loudest. Handsome and reckless and lovable; a man who now and then must link arms with danger and go off a-venturing.

And now he had ridden gaily into the Last Great Adventure, and Mitch Hawkins was going to try to fill his place—as if ten men could have done it!

SHORT of the stoop, a sound of snapping branches arrested Mitch. A man in a fringed leather coat and heavy bullhide chaps rode out of the chaparral. Sheriff Day Biddle dismounted and drew off a rawhide glove.

"Late out," Mitch said. "Turn your horse in the corral and have a bait o' grub."

"Wish I had the time," said Biddle. "I'll have a cup of coffee and be riding."

Where his hat-brim shaded his forehead and the skin about his eyes, Biddle was untanned as a baby; but his cheeks and nose and chin were beet-red. He was a large man, incapable of hurrying, with merry blue eyes. But he was sober tonight.

Cristobal and Juana, the Mexican *criados*, ate in their little room that adjoined the main adobe building. Dorie came from the black iron cook-stove, wiping her hands on her apron, a comely, slender girl with brown hair pulled into a knot low on her neck and cheeks red with the stove's glare.

"Sit down, Sheriff," she said warmly.

"You haven't been this way in two months."

"Thanks," the sheriff said, but indicated he would stand. "If I was to set I might never get up again. I've been popping this da— I beg your pardon, ma'am—this accursed brush tangle since four o'clock this morning."

Mitch poured three cups of coffee and waited in silence, as was his way, for the sheriff to explain. But Dorie asked quickly: "What happened?"

"Dutch Johnny Lang was murdered last night. Two hombres robbed his roadhouse and shot him 'twixt the shoulder-blades. The stage-driver found him 'bout sundown."

Dorie exclaimed sharply. "Beasts! How could anyone do such a thing?"

Mitch stirred his coffee, not speaking. Days when there was little to do, he had stopped in at Dutch Johnny's post house on the river road for a glass of beer and an hour or two with the old man. They were kindred souls, in a way: Mitch had little to say and Dutch Johnny couldn't say it so anybody understood. Those idle days would be empty days now. But he said only: "Two men?"

"Oh, nobody saw it," conceded the sheriff. "But there was two whiskey glasses set out. I've been to every shack and coyote hole I know of. They've shucked out clean."

Mitch was looking into his cup and his eyes were as dark as the coffee. "Stay tonight. I'll help you look tomorrow. I know some holes."

"Nope. Got to get back." Biddle siphoned off the hot coffee. "Palomas has got real important since the war, having a bank and all. Be a shame to let them *bandidos* discourage industry by robbing the bank. I better rattle a spur."

He set down the cup. "Thank you, Miz Talbert." To Mitch: "Got a minute before you eat? My hoss is losin' a shoe."

Mitch went out with him. The sheriff shook his head when he pulled out the tool drawer, in the shed.

"I just wanted a word, was all. You heard anything from Jess lately?"

Mitch looked at him, his brown eyes steady. "Jess is dead," he said. "War office reckons so, leastways."

Biddle returned his glance, and the color came up through Mitch's hard cheeks, for it seemed to him the sheriff knew how it was with him and Dorie.

"Officially, yes. But somehow I can't see him dead; him as wild as a hoss on a windy ridge, and as full of hellin'. I was his first lieutenant when he disappeared, you know. Funny about that. He wasn't kidnaped. He rode away with all his possibles."

The sheriff frowned. "A queer, reckless sort, Jess. Ridin' with him wasn't no job for a timid man, nor a squeamish. We stormed artillery batteries when you could reach out anywheres and catch a cannonball. More'n once I was ready to hole up, when I seen half the men had been cut down, but he was always up ahead, wavin' his saber and cussin' us on, laughin' like hell when we took a position and cut the gunners to pieces.

"Guerrilla-hunting, it was the same. Never took a prisoner if he could help it. Kill 'em all before they could surrender, was his way. Saved trouble." He paused. "His kind are great in war. But peace-times they sometimes get to hankering for excitement and wind up playing plumb rough." Now the sheriff pulled his hand from his coat pocket and turned it over, and there on his palm lay a battered lead ball.

"Ever see one o' these?"

"It ain't a .44," Mitch frowned.

"No. It's a .36; mighty odd caliber. We took it out of Dutch Johnny. Fits only the Navy gun Colt brought out during the war. Some of the officers got hold of 'em. Jess had one. Only .36 I ever seen."

With a quick motion he pocketed the ball and swung to the saddle.

"Just thought I'd mention it, Mitch. Keep your eyes open for a couple of hard-ridin' hombres. One of them may be ridin' a hoss shy a shoe. I picked one up, near the roadhouse."

WITH Mitch, it was as though a pond, just settling, has been stirred to cloudiness. During supper he tried to root the sheriff's suspicions out of his mind. *Jess is dead.* He printed those words on his brain. *Jess is dead!*

Out of nothing Biddle had raised a mountain of doubt. There were a hundred Navy guns in Texas. He would not be restrained from speaking by a spectre the sheriff had raised.

Darkness pressed in upon the cabin, and the darkness was a pressure on Mitch Hawkins, lingering there at the table.

Dorie was at the sink with the dishes, and Mitch went over and said: "Leave them wait. I've got to talk."

His big, rough hands hung. Dorie's gray eyes were puzzled. Awkwardness assailed him. Like a hound pup, he thought—an ugly, overgrown dog full of stumblings and foolishness.

"Dorie—" he said; and stopped.

There were men outside. They had not ridden in; they had come in stealth. Their boots made so little sound on the hard adobe of the yard that only Mitch heard them approach the mud stoop.

"In the pantry," he said, pushing her away. He drew his big five-shot Paterson and cocked it, and he was crouching behind the sink when the men entered.

Boldly, without knock or gun in his hand, the black man stood smiling in the portal. Black—that was how Mitch thought of him. Black of beard and eye and hair; almost black of skin. A flat-crowned black hat on his long hair, and sombre, dusty clothes on his bone-sharp frame.

The other man wore a red stubble of whiskers, and he was short, looking as stocky and powerful as a Percheron.

In a sudden flash, Mitch realized that the black man's coat was a military tunic; and then he could look through the beard, and the skin burnt by exposure to mahogany, and recognize the long jaw, like a plow, and the bold nose, and every other mark he knew so well.

"Jess!" he said, standing slowly. "Jess!"

Talbert faced him, quick and sharp. A frown replaced the smile as he noted the gun; but then he laughed.

"Mitch! A hell of a way to welcome a friend!" He came in and slapped the cowboy stoutly on the shoulder.

Mitch put the Colt away. "I didn't hear no horses," he said. "You give us a turn—"

"Us?" Talbert said that and turned his eyes about the room. At that moment the pantry door swung out.

Talbert was across the room and catching Dorie in his arms, crushing her to him and swinging her about. Mitch kept his eyes on the red-bearded man.

Jess Talbert let his wife down, breathless and pale, stunned with the suddenness of it. She put her hand to her head, staring at him.

"Jess! All these months! They wrote six months ago that you were dead."

"Are you going to believe them, or me?" Talbert asked her. "I can promise you I ain't dead yet—not *quite!*"

His companion's laugh had an off-color ring that quickly shaped Mitch Hawkin's opinion of him. Talbert waved a hand at the man and said, "Stub Farish—Stub'll do. We've been through some times, me and him." Glancing at Mitch, he asked: "Any whiskey around?"

Mitch reached into the cupboard under the sink and brought out a wicker-bound bottle of Mexican *aguardiente.* "This is all."

Talbert poured two pottery cups full of the brandy and he and his companion drank; drank as if they needed it, Mitch thought.

"You might tell us, Jess. . . ." Dorie frowned.

Talbert breathed deeply, relishing the burn of the liquor. About him there was a sense of each raw nerve being exposed. He was cognizant, not only of what was going on in this room, but of what might be going on outside. It was a quality almost feral.

Talbert wiped his lips. "I almost forget where it starts," he said. "When you've been on the dodge so long, you forget there ever was another kind of life. Two Mexes kidnaped me out of camp one night, aiming to hold me for ransom. They got cold feet and turned me over to General Luján as a prisoner of war. Then there were a couple of months in the *jusgado* at Monterrey, sharing a cell with Stub. We busted out, by the grace of God and a loose brick. Since then. . . . Well, you put a fox in a forest full o' hounds, and he may be some little time gettin' out with his hide. But here we are."

"And hungry." Farish added.

Dorie put the food back on the stove and made fresh coffee. Mitch was silent while they ate, trying not to think. He was glad Talbert was not dead; but he could not be glad he was back. He was a good man, Mitch was, but he was not a hypocrite.

When they had shoved their plates back, he mentioned their horses.

"Left them back in the brush," said Talbert. "Didn't know what to expect when we rode in—rifle balls or handshake. Long-loopers might have had the ranch by now. But good old Mitch—I should have known you wouldn't give me up till hell froze!"

"I'll bring them in," Mitch said, getting up.

"Not these crazy Mexican jugheads," said Talbert. "They wouldn't let a stranger ride 'em; and they won't lead."

The men got up, Farish chewing on a rolled-up tortilla as they went toward the door. Dorie spoke from the table with some hesitation. "Jess. . . ."

Talbert waited.

"It's terrible to have to tell you this now," she said. "But Mrs. Mundy, over on the river, is due to have a baby any day. Her little boy was by this afternoon. She wants me to come tonight."

Mitch's eyes widened. Mundy had told him only last week that there was to be another baby; he hadn't implied any imminence of the event. Mitch scratched his head. He didn't know about these things.

"All right," Talbert. "I'll ride over with you."

Mitch watched their dark shapes go down the trail. He held his breath when he saw Jess Talbert walk swiftly to the barn and reach up to the horse-shoe rack. Then Talbert went on into the brush.

DORIE went to her room. Mitch left the house and walked with long, slow paces up the trail that wound through the dense chaparral jungle. His lanky features were gloomy; his long, angular limbs stiff. Brush-spice was heavy in the warm night. Mitch caught the rank odor of tobacco smoke. They were close ahead, and as yet he had not put together the words he would use.

He came around a bend and there they were, working with a horse in the black pool of shadow beneath a misshapen hackberry. He heard Talbert swing a stone heavily against a horse-shoe nail.

They looked up, startled. Talbert had the pony's left front leg doubled back, vising the foreleg between his knees as he worked. He let it drop.

Mitch stood with his hands in his pockets. His jaws were tight. He asked: "Lose a shoe?"

"Kind of looks that way," Jess said. He could be sarcastic.

"We got tools at the barn."

"I was afraid he might pick up a stone."

"Came all the way from Dutch Johnny Lang's thataway, didn't he?" Mitch asked.

Talbert, a long, straight shape in the gloom, pushed his hat back. "I don't know," he said; there was no angry color in his voice, no panic. "I don't know where I lost it."

"Sheriff Biddle found one on the river road this morning. Found a .36 ball in Johnny, too. Figured they might both be yours."

"A detective," said Talbert, with a flash of white teeth. "How did he figure that?"

"He knew you had a Colt's Navy gun. It was all guesswork, I reckon. Except he was sure you weren't dead. But if that shoe he picked up fits your hoss's hoof, Jess—" He stopped.

Talbert began to roll a cigarette, accepting his guilt with complete equanimity. "The damned old square-head pulled a gun on us. It was him or us."

"You were robbing him, weren't you?"

"Not exactly. We didn't have money to pay for our likker, and started to walk out. He tried to stop us."

"But his till was empty when the stage got there."

Stub Farish said: "He didn't need the money after he was dead. Sure, we took it."

"It's still murder."

"They couldn't prove anything," Jess said softly, "if we got rid of the horse. If you could keep your mouth shut."

"Johnny Lang was my friend." Mitch

frowned, and there was silence, Talbert studying him. "I ain't a preacher, Jess," Mitch Hawkins said. "But what I'm saying is gospel. They'll hang you if they ever catch up with you. But it would be mighty hard on Dorie. If you can get out of the country before they find you, I can forget I ever saw you, and Dorie won't know why you left."

Talbert looked at Farish, his eyeballs shining. "Fair enough," he said, presently. "I only came back to sell the ranch, get Dorie, and move on, anyway. Suppose I leave you to sell the place for me? After I get located somewhere, I'll send for her."

Mitch's stomach tightened. "You'd take her into a life like that?"

"A life like that I aim to settle down after I get a stake."

"You'll never settle down. Like Biddle says, it's in the blood. You've got to be forever off a-hellin' or a-killin'. You can't take her into that, Jess!"

Talbert, his eyes narrow and hard, took a long breath. "So it's that way! You'd like to keep right on taking care of her for me, eh?"

There was sour disgust in Talbert's words. "All right, listen. I'll get out—tonight. I'm counting on you to sell the place for me. I'll send for Dorie. Any objections?"

"Yes," Mitch said. "But she's your wife. I reckon she'll go if you call."

"Yes. I reckon she will." In his voice there was all the contempt of a man like Talbert for a man like Mitch. "I've got one more little transaction to tend to here, and then I'm going on."

"If that little transaction is robbing the bank," Mitch said, "I wouldn't try it. Biddle's got a trap set."

Jess looked at Farish; pulled at his beard. Then nodded. "Thanks, Mitch. I'll just remember that. No, we won't try anything so foolish."

MITCH was glad he would not have to tell Dorie tonight. It would give him a few days, until she returned from Mundy's. Was there any way to do it but to say: "Jess killed Dutch Johnny. He's run off, and he ain't coming back."

Lying on his dark bunk, Mitch hated Talbert. Hated him for a man who would break a woman's heart to please his own vanity. For he knew that Dorie still loved Jess, and would follow him.

But for her, Mitch knew how he would finish up this black business. Johnny Lang had been his friend, and Jess Talbert was no longer his friend; and the way men settled such problems was with guns.

But he would not let Dorie be disgraced and her heart broken, though, God knew, those things lay before her. . . .

He was out at dawn, hunting a bunch of *ladinos* that had bushed up somewhere. A fog lay wetly on the ground, cutting visibility down to a few rods, so that he rode in a circumscribed world peopled with gaunt-armed chaparro. By now, Mitch reckoned, Jess Talbert and Stub Farish were forty miles up river.

It was not much comfort. For Dorie, he would keep things going; for her, he would work this hard-luck ranch at a profit, if long days and a thousand brush-wounds meant anything.

Would Biddle ever know how close a guess he'd made? He wouldn't dream, while he sat in the bank waiting for trouble, that the men were riding out of his jurisdiction for good.

It was right here that Mitch Hawkins sat up straight on the saddle and stared into the brush as if he were seeing the bank robbed before his eyes.

Blind, stupid fool! To give Talbert a trump over Sheriff Biddle! By warning Jess of Biddle's trap, he'd given him a chance to lay his own trap for the sheriff!

Mitch forgot the cows. He rode at a rack down a dry arroyo, coming, an hour later, onto the river road. But the sun was at zenith when he saw the town at the foot of a long slope beneath him. The streets looked deserted—unusually so. When he rode in, the reason was grimly plain. Mitch had guessed right—but an hour late.

THERE were horses before the bank—horses and men. Some of the men were already a-saddle, and others were talking with the sheriff who, red as beef and tight-lipped, was pulling on gloves before mounting. Mitch saw that part of the group was at the door

of the little adobe bank; a man's booted legs could be seen on the sill, his body lying within.

Mitch asked: "What's happened?"

Biddle's glance was slow and sharp. "You got eyes, Mitch. They gutted the bank."

"But you were waiting for them!"

"Not after the fire started in the back of the livery stable. It took 'most every man in town to swing buckets. Whilst we were fighting, those hombres shot the clerk, and helped themselves."

Biddle looked at the sweat on Mitch's forehead. "You been hurryin', Mitch. Worried about something?"

Mitch's eyes fell, came back with a sudden frankness. "Yes. How long ago did it happen?"

"Half an hour. Nobody heard the shot. We just found Tom."

Mitch said: "I'd like a word, private. You know you ain't going to find those boys without help, in the brush."

There was a small anger in Biddle's eyes. With Mitch, he stepped to a recessed doorway, and here Mitch said: "Jess came back last night."

"Knew it was him!" Biddle struck fist against palm. "Where is he?"

"Where would he be, after this? Ridin' hard. Holin' up."

Slowly, Biddle nodded. "I'm glad to hear you say that. I thought you were trying to shield him, maybe."

"I'm only trying to shield his wife. It ain't right she should be pointed out as a murderer's wife; or the wife of a man that was hung. I reckon I could find those boys. I'll make a hoss-trade with you, Sheriff."

"All I'll promise is that Jess Talbert will be a dead man five minutes after I catch up with him."

"All right. Make that part of the bargain. I'll promise to turn him over to you, if you'll promise nobody will ever know who he was."

"How can I do that?" The sheriff frowned. "Everybody hereabouts knows him."

"Not with a fine black beard. Not black as a *cholo*. Not with a bullet through his head."

Biddle looked at him. He said: "It's a bargain, then. Where are they?"

"There's an old line camp near the river. I figure it's the place Jess would go to hole up. He'd know you've got the roads watched. A jackrabbit couldn't find that camp without a map".

"Let's go," the sheriff said.

IT SEEMED as if Mitch was deliberately trying the tempers of the posse. Into the cruellest, thorniest jungle that ever turned a man's face to raw beef he led them, plunging headlong.

They were lost. In this green wilderness where only gullies and the vast gorge of the river gave relief from the eternal lift and fall of low, sandy knolls, brush-clad, there was no way of taking landmarks, other than by the sun. The *brasada* stretched a hundred miles on every side, crowding in on them whichever way they turned.

But Mitch Hawkins rode on. This was home range, to him. This was where he risked his life every day, chasing wild outlaw longhorns, taking a throw with his twenty-five foot rawhide riata when and where his pony gave it to him.

In a red, streaming twilight, he pulled rein. "We've missed it. I'll quarter ahead and get a sign."

Biddle kept his voice down. "Take it easy, Mitch. There's two of them."

Mitch smiled crookedly. "Reckon I'm a poor liar. But I've a notion I can take them alone, without anybody getting hurt."

He rode ahead.

From the lip of a barranca Mitch saw, a few hundred feet below, the dense green-black motte of hackberry where he had made dry camp on many a night. He crossed the wash, conscious that Jess and Farish must be watching him.

Reaching the other side, he dismounted and tied the reins to the great Mexican pommel. He gave the pony a slap on the rump and watched it lunge away into the brush. Then he slipped into the barranca and ran silently.

He had the picture of the camp in his mind: A round cave in the jungle, roofed with foliage, invisible from ten feet.

Mitch crawled up the bank. Treading with care, he approached the camp. Voices were in the darkling brush:

"Don't hear it now. That damned fool! Him and his Sunday-school preachin'—"

"He'll be no trouble. When he starts a-preachin' this time, I'll make Colt-gospel."

Mitch's hands parted the screen of wolf willow and he was in the enclosure, looking at the men whose attention was for the other side of the thicket.

He said: "Then you'd better start right now. I did all my preaching last night."

Stub Farish moved first, white-faced, his gun half-drawn as he flung his body swiftly about. Mitch Hawkins' bullet caught him in the chest, high up, and he went over on his back and lay still.

As recklessly as he had done everything else, Jess Talbert met Mitch. He had a rifle in his hands, a brass-mounted carbine; he made no attempt to rise, but hurled himself forward in a flat dive, his bearded cheek against the stock. He was cursing in two languages, shouting in a way that would have shaken the nerves of a man less streadfast.

But if Mitch lacked flash, if he were easily put upon, he was completely single-minded. He had Talbert's face in the sights of his Paterson, and very carefully he pounded a bullet into it, watching the bright mask of scarlet spill down from the hole under his left eye to mat in his beard.

Talbert's bullet went whining through the brush, knee-high. He did not fire again.

* * *

Dorie came home while Mitch was eating late supper. She took off her wraps and Mitch fetched a plate of beans and fried salt pork. She sat down.

Confusion paralyzed Mitch. Where to start—how much to tell? After a while he said: "Miz Mundy's baby come right soon."

"The baby won't be along for several weeks."

Mitch looked up. Was it the lamp that made her eyes shine, that brought a flush of high color to her cheeks?

"But you said—I thought—"

"Oh, Mitch—! Was a man ever so blind? I lied to Jess—because I was afraid of him! I had to get out of the house!"

Mitch's heart was a mallet hitting his ribs. "But he's your husband!" he said.

"Do you think I could go back to him after knowing he'd let me worry needlessly for over a year, when he could have come home any time? He was lying; lying about everything. That wasn't the Jess Talbert I married. This one was born on a battlefield when the old Jess died."

Mitch desperately wanted to affirm that. But into his head came one more adornment for the elaborate lie he had concocted, that would serve better than the truth, since it would save her feelings.

"Dorie," he said heavily, "Jess is dead. The bank was robbed today; he was killed trying to stop the bandits." He could get Biddle to attest that later.

Dorie put her hand over his. "Poor Mitch. You couldn't tell a good lie in a hundred years. I followed you last night, when you went after Jess. I heard everything you said to him."

Mitch was staring, a roar of breaking surf in his ears.

"I heard the rest of the story when Bill Mundy came home tonight and said you'd killed two bank-robbers single-handed. I knew everything, then. I was glad."

There was a hurting in Mitch's throat, a hunger in his eyes. His big hand took Dorie's, roughly. He said: "I was trying to say something last night, before Jess came. I'd still like to say it. If I could just wrangle the words I want—"

"You've done all the talking you need to, Mitch," Dorie told him. "What you tried to do for me was the prettiest speech a man ever made a woman. You see, Jess talked with his tongue; but you talk with your heart."

"That's—nice," Mitch said. "I reckon that's it. I reckon that's why all this thumpin' in my chest. My heart's trying to talk, and now that I can't—can't *do* something to let it talk, I'm tongue-tied."

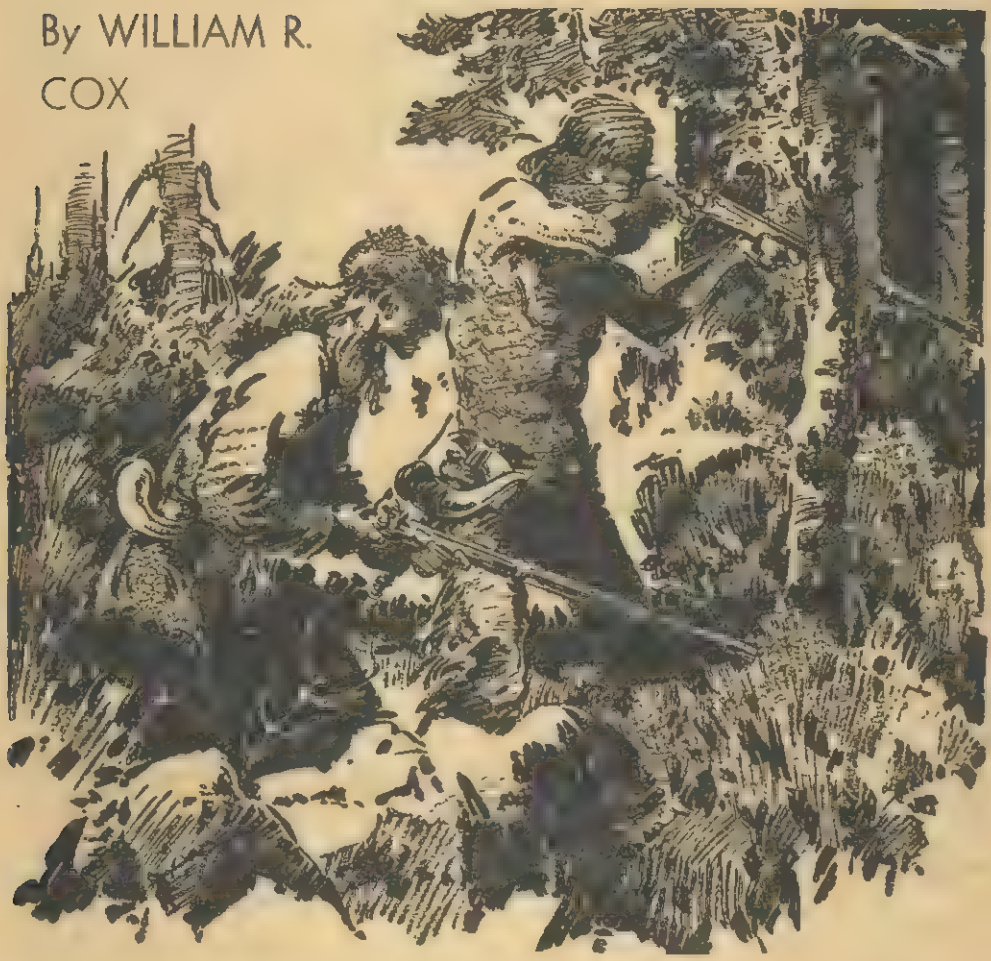
"Are you, Mitch" Dorie said. "Then maybe I'd better help."

And she did.

And after that, in his own way, Mitch Hawkins talked a-plenty.

• • LONG GUNS AND

By WILLIAM R. COX



Vigorous Novelette of the Buckskin Frontier

Wilderness lore has no stranger or more fascinating story to tell than that of the half-pint little greenhorn, Ben Palmer, who stowed away with that grim party of west-bound buckskin pioneers, and who became the deadliest woodsman—with long rifle, scalping knife or bare hands — in all that uncharted and wild Ohio River frontier!

CHAPTER ONE

Scourge of the Savage Border

LEAVING Fort Pitt, the party was a bit astonished to find Ben Palmer among them, but no one suggested that he was not welcome. The little man from Jersey was no bigger than his octagon-barreled rifle, and sometimes it seemed as though a strong wind might catch in his flapping ears and blow

SCALP KNIVES • • •

Ben watched with fascinated eyes as Kelly, still with his bare torso blacked, pressed the trigger. . . .

him away, but about him there was a quiet air which disarmed the giants of the scouting party.

Casper, the bearded, loquacious leader, told a lot of tall tales that would frighten a greenhorn to death if he believed them, but Ben Palmer just listened and said nothing. Jenkins, the oldster, tough as nails; Hoseby, the young Southerner who had taken a dozen scalps; Paul Patou, polished Frenchman now long settled on the Western Frontier, all took turns in playing small jokes upon the newcomer, but Ben grinned and kept his own counsel, learning as he went.

Casper gave up, finally, and being a naturally talkative person, began instructing Ben in the lore of the western woods. One day he talked of squirrels, or the exceedingly rare albino, of the black squirrel only found in the hushed depths of a trackless forest. He pointed into a high oak and said, "Up yonder's one of the common gray critters—or kin you see that far?"

Ben upped with the long rifle and shot

with seeming carelessness. A small body came hurtling down, striking lightly among the branches. Casper picked it up and looked where the head should be. No one spoke for a moment.

Then Ben said apologetically, "I shoulda just blown the top of his skull off. Back home in Freehold we used to try and hit them at the base of the ear."

After that he was one of them. He hunted the turkey, the deer for their provisions. They took delight in filling his agile mind with facts beyond price.

Casper said, "He's just a natural ranger. Never seen a little man take so to the woods." The others concurred.

Ben opened up, when he knew it was safe. He told them about Jersey, and the farms, and his tough old father who had beaten him because Ben would rather hunt than work. But he did not tell them about Susan Gratcorn.

He had been willing to settle down for yellow-haired Susan. At a barn dance, under a harvest moon, he had broken down and told her so. She was a buxom, sweet lass, taller by an inch than Ben, and all the swains were after her.

Jason Huntley, indeed, came looking for her just as Ben stammered his protestation.

Jason, skulking, overheard. Susan laughed. Ben, the little, homespun-clad ne'er-do-well, was trapped between them, speared upon that ridicule. The undersized man never lived who could endure laughter directed at him. Ben swung right and left fists and Jason went down. Then he whirled upon Susan, his love curdling, and said harshly, "There's your big man. Take him. You'll live to hear my name and be proud to say you knew me, and that I wanted you!"

Then Ben Palmer came to the frontier, to seek a name for himself.

ONE night, far along the journey which was to take them to the Ohio, where a flatboat would pick them up en route to Fort Tarry, they were cooking a rabbit for a stew made with roots Casper had pronounced succulent. The rabbit was scarcely turned brown when a man walked into camp and kicked at the fire, scattering it, upsetting the kettle.

Ben stared up, his knife drawn, but Casper restrained him, saying, "Kelly!"

The stranger was a giant, towering over Casper by four inches. He was dark as any Indian, his hair was black and long, to his shoulders. He had a jutting nose, like a buzzard, and his mouth was a slash in a hunk of mahogany. He carried two knives and a tomahawk in his belt, besides his rifle.

His voice was strangely sweet, like a young boy's. He said, "Delawares, Casper. Right behind you. A dozen."

Casper said, "Have they spotted us?"

Kelly nodded. "But not me. Get going. I'll wait."

Casper said. "We'll double back."

It was very exciting. Kelly disappeared, almost at once. Casper and the others grabbed their packs. Ben hadn't as much to tote as the others, so he stayed in the rear, with Moseby.

They went along the trail, in the black of the night, under trees which above them joined branches to hide the skies. This was a place the sun never saw, in the deepest forest of the Valley. This was a place for ambush.

Casper muttered, "The Delawares been peaceful—I never checked much for Injun sign. I wonder what happened? I bet that Kelly stirred 'em up. I bet that Kelly killed some of 'em. Never happy, that Kelly, unless he's killin' Injuns."

Jenkins said, "There's good and there's bad on the Border, but Kelly's the queerest."

Ben went along, his heart beating like a trip-hammer. He had heard myriad tales about the Indians, but those he had seen around Fort Pitt had been blanketed, sodden with rum.

He had begun to think the Indian tales were all myth, that the '90's had seen the end of them. He had scarcely believed there was such a man as Kelly. Casper had told him about Kelly, but he had thought it just another tall tale. . . .

* * *

Kelly (said Casper) was born on the frontier, in West Virginia, sometime in the '60's. His father had been a great,

roistering Irishman, but his mother was quality, people said. Padriac Kelly had taken up a section among the Hurons, as the French called the Wyandots, and had prospered.

But in 1774 a canoe-load of Wyandots had been massacred down below Yellow Creek by some fool whites, and that had set them off. Padriac got along with them for years by giving them rum and presents—said Casper—and by keeping his word to them. But one day he had an altercation about some skins, and although the Wyandots went away, they came back.

Young Kelly was then about twenty. He was a gawky, big youth, always in the bush, roaming around, spending half his time with Indians. He was the fastest runner in the West, and his speed had impressed the redskins, so that they pampered him and taught him forest tricks. When his father had that argument with the chief, Matanwa, Kelly was out on a hunt.

In the course of his hunt, young Kelly came across a deer track and went bucketing along at top speed towards a salt lick, hoping for a certain big buck.

When he got to the stream, a stout-bodied big man was lounging about, making some noise, giving orders to a trio of lazy Delawares who seemed dominated by him. Kelly recognized Francois Boulogne, the *coureur de bois,* trader with the Indians, dispenser of rum which demoralized and ruined Kelly's friends.

Especially Kelly was angry because Boulogne had corrupted Winawa, the Swift, Wyandot sub-chief and the only redskin who could come near the Irish lad in a foot-race. Being upset about the loss of his shot at the big buck, Kelly proceeded to speak his mind to Boulogne.

He said, "You filthy, low, stinking son of a raccoon, you should be run from the Border. If I ever catch you giving rum to Winawa again, I'll cut your throat and hang you up by the heels."

Boulogne let out a roar and came at Kelly with a knife, and the youth met him halfway and there was quite a struggle. Kelly beat Boulogne almost to death in about a minute, but the Indians had been drinking, and when Francois called for help, they flung themselves upon Kelly and dragged him off.

So he had to fight loose from them, grab up his rifle and run for it. Being a huge, strong fellow, he managed to do this, leaving Boulogne to bathe his wounds and work up his hatred.

Kelly went a long ways on that hunt, looking for game which seemed unusually scarce for that season. But Boulogne went swiftly to the Wyandots and gave out with rum until he got them excited, and then Matanwa groused about Padriac Kelly and the skins, and that was Boulogne's opportunity. He got together a band of them and sent them over to Kelly's farm.

There was just Padriac and Moira, his wife and little Moira at the farm. The Indians did not wear war paint, and seemed to want to argue—while Boulogne sat back and sneered at Padriac.

It was a scene Padriac had been through many times before. But this time there was a difference, as he soon found out, because a couple of the redskins seized Moira and intimated that if he did not see their side of it, things would happen to Mrs. Kelly.

Padriac, you see, was a giant. He also had a temper and some brains, and he saw what was happening and knew he did not have a chance. He smelled the rum and he saw the hatred in Boulogne's eyes and he did only what he could. He seized a long-handled axe and went to work.

That was a bad thing. Matanwa struck once with his tomahawk and poor Moira was dead. Padriac, himself, killed two of them with the axe in less time than it takes to tell it. The little girl got underfoot and Matanwa cut her almost in two. Padriac killed another brave, and another, trying to get at Boulogne. They closed with him, but he stretched a couple more, and then Boulogne had to draw his pistol and shoot Padriac in the head, or there would have been no more Indians left.

But that was not the worst of it. Young Kelly had cut the trail of the party and become alarmed. He ran for the farm as fast as he could, and as he burst out of the clearing, they were killing his father, and before he could recover from his stupor, Matanwa had driven an arrow through his shoulder, and he was a prisoner.

They bound him, and he had to watch the farm and all the crops and implements burn to the ground, while the Indians drank rum which Boulogne had thoughtfully brought along. Then they beat him along the trail to their camp and tied him up for the squaws to torture.

A funny thing happened then—Casper said. The squaws threw stones and prodded Kelly with sticks, but after staring at his ugly face and those funny red eyes he gets on him when he's mad, they stopped and went away. They said it was no fun, that Kelly wasn't afraid. But that began the tale they tell of Kelly and the women—that no woman can withstand him, that women are attracted to him by his very ugliness and terrible reputation.

Well—said C a s p e r—Winawa would have probably saved Kelly, for the Wyandot was really his friend, but Boulogne got Winawa drunk, and the torture went on. They made him run the gauntlet that night, and if that ever happens to you, Ben, remember that the strongest men are first in the line. If you can battle past them, you may live. . . .

Kelly near killed a couple of them with his one good arm, and then he came down to the squaws only half dead and they didn't do much. So they took him and painted his face black and put him in a tent and laced it up, and Kelly knew he was going to be burned tomorrow. And there was nothing he could do about it.

The way these Indians have of burning you is not good. They tie your hands and let you walk around on a short rope, and under your feet is hickory charcoal. It takes a long while, usually. . . . No, it is not good.

Kelly spent part of a bad night in that tepee. Some people say Kelly is mad, and they may be right, for that is a thing which would drive a man out of his mind, knowing the dawn would bring such torture to his body, and with his soul racked by memory of his dead parents and little sister and his home gone and nothing left to live for anyway—except revenge. A time like that would do things to any man. . . .

Towards dawn, Kelly says, a guard came in to taunt him, and Kelly kicked the guard, downed him, got his knife and cut himself loose. Then he sneaked into the woods and ran, all battered as he was, to the nearest settlement.

That is what Kelly says—continued Casper—but Winawa's sister, Moon Over Tree, dove headfirst to her death off a cliff soon after. And the Indian guard talked to a man who told me . . . but never mind. Kelly got away and brought back some scouts and they killed and killed for awhile, until Winawa got his tribe away.

Winawa never came back to the Ohio Valley and Kelly just kept killing Indians, Casper ended. It's a religion with him. He's even been arrested for it—at first he even murdered them in settlements, wherever he saw them. He's the best bush ranger in the country—picked up a lot of tricks from Wetzel, like reloading his rifle while running, and tracking stunts, and things which only Wetzel and the Indians themselves can do. Kelly is the greatest name on the frontier, but I wouldn't want his killings on my conscience—not all of them!

That was Kelly, who now stalked behind them, ambushing the Delaware war party.

Ben Palmer tingled with expectation. He had no horror of Kelly nor his deeds, only a great curiosity.

Ben, in many ways, was a strange little fellow. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Hell at Fort Tarry!

THE others of the party deployed themselves with their backs to the Ohio, but Ben climbed a tree. It was a giant elm, and its foliage was thick enough to hide Ben's small figure, and as he looked westward he could see the morning light reflected over and beyond the forest which had seemed endless. There was a mist, which rose slowly, pink-tinged by the dawn.

They had moved fast all night, and there had been no trace of Kelly, nor had they seen an Indian. Ben might have thought it all another frontier joke, save that Casper and his company were sweating too hard and moving too fast. Now, with the sun rising, they were making a stand. The mist lifted still further and

a ray of clear sunshine broke through. Ben gulped and forgot to look for Indians.

The broad Ohio lay beneath him. The majestic stream wended sluggishly through the valley, lined on the one side with cliffs brown and green, on the other by the stately trees of the forests. It poured westward, the way toward adventure, leading into lands known to only a few of the hardiest white men. It was the road to empire, and Ben felt it, roosting in his tree, his rifle cocked over a branch.

There came, then, the call of a turkey gobbler, *"Chug-chug-chuk-kaw-ka,"* repeated at intervals. Casper had told him of this. Ben's eyes snapped front, his gun came up. Nothing seemed to move in the forest save small animals, a bird or two. Then a partridge fluttered up and a bush swayed.

Ben's gaze focused, his sharp eyes narrowed. With infinitesimal care, the fronds of the bush were parted. A face, striped hideously, dark as a Negro's, peered out. One feather tilted from the scalplock of the closely shaven head. The arm which held the bush aside was sinewy, the chest was broad, the neck solid. For a long moment the savage remained immobile and Ben held his breath at sight of his first rampaging Indian.

Then the brave stepped into the glade which Ben's tree commanded, and Ben had sense enough not to fire. Casper and the others were within range, he thought. It was not up to him to begin the fracas. This might be merely the advance guard of the war party, and shooting at him might be an error.

Other movement caught Ben's eye. Tree trunks seemed suddenly alive. Redskinned figures which melted into the landscape began to take form as the morning sun filtered captiously through the thick foliage and dappled the scene. There were at least a dozen Delawares under the chief with the single feather.

Still Ben was breathless, waiting. This was new to him, but he was eager to learn. Somewhere about was Kelly, and even Casper deferred to the big man of the woods. The chief was reading sign now, his nose almost on the ground, as though he was suspicious of something. The Indians seemed to be young men, very brawny, a typical war party.

The chief grunted and they were all grouped for a moment over the footprints. Ben remembered then that Caspar had dispersed his forces from the clearing, and that the tracks must lead in various directions. The chief raised his head. He was alarmed, it was in his painted face, his rolling eyes. Already his men were starting for shelter. The canny Delaware had sensed the ambush!

Ben's finger was on the trigger. Surely, Casper would fire now! They would retreat to the woods and harry the whites with a running battle, at which they excelled, were the Indians not now despatched.

From the east, then, came the wail. It was almost inhuman. It was neither complaint nor boast nor appeal to the gods. It was plain, unadulterated threat, such as the bowl of the wolf, the roar of the lion. The sound of it echoed among the trees, and the Delawares were frozen for a split instant.

In that tiny space of time, the guns roared. Ben saw the chief with the feather stagger, but continue to run, and Ben aimed and fired carefully. The Indian leaped into the air, shrieked a strange cry, and fell prostrate. Even while Ben's nimble fingers reloaded his rifle, he watched the victim of his slug beat a tattoo with his heels and die upon the leafy ground of the forest..

At that range, the scouts could not miss. Five Indians were down, seven were rushing away. The farthest was almost out of sight among the trees when Kelly appeared. He just stepped out and swung a tomahawk in one fierce, quick blow. The leading Indian flopped like a fish upon a river bank, blood spurting from his torn skull.

Kelly's rifle was over his arm, carelessly. Ben rammed home his shot, detached the rod. The second Indian leaped at Kelly, who sidestepped almost effortlessly, then swung the hatchet at the brave's chest. So sharp was the blade that this redskin also died.

The third, using discretion, swerved and sought to flee from the waiting, indolent Kelly. Ben remembered to raise his rifle, then, but saw that Kelly was

using his own long gun in a quick snap shot at the departing Delaware.

Kelly got him, too, right between the shoulder blades, but the two remaining flung themselves in desperation upon the big man. They were agile, athletic bucks and they had recognized Kelly now, and were imbued with fear. One seized Kelly's gun, the other plunged in with shining long blade. It was good teamwork.

Ben sighted with exceeding care. There was a chance that as they struggled, Kelly might be switched into the range of Ben's fire. He waited, holding his breath. The Indian with the knife had missed and was gathering himself for another try. Ben fired at him, squeezing gently, holding the gun up as he had been taught, against the recoil.

The Indian spun about, started to run away. He stopped and fell down as though he had been tripped. Ben nodded happily and already he was reloading, tamping down the powder, the little rag between his teeth, reaching for the powder horn.

THERE was sudden fire from the thicket and then Kelly had the first attacker by the throat, holding him at arm's length. Ben had one look at the dark, despairing face of the brave caught in the grasp of the terrible buckskin man, then the axe descended, inexorably, blotting out forever the hawk-nosed face.

And Kelly stood there, spattered with blood, holding the Indian by the throat until the last breath was gone.

Ben scrambled down from the tree, and when he had reached the forest floor, Kelly had already taken the scalp of his latest victim.

Casper was sweating a little, although the morning was cool, and the others, particularly the Frenchman, Paul Patou, looked a little sick. But Kelly was busy gathering scalps, and Ben was strangely fascinated by the quick expert lift of the sharp blade, the dangling, bits of hair and skin. This, then was the West—here were scalped Indians, here the West's greatest hero. He stared at Kelly, and that worthy turned and returned the glance.

Kelly's high, immature voice said, "You were in the tree, weren't ye, little man?"

"My name's Ben Palmer."

Kelly showed his teeth, but his eyes gleaming like fiery coals, did not smile. While Ben watched, the fire died and the eyes became normal again, brown and clear and watchful.

"That was good shootin' on the buck with the knife," Kelly said.

Casper, recovering his aplomb a bit, said, "Ben's a mighty fine shot—for a greenhorn."

Kelly shrugged. "You can prob'ly all outshoot him in a match. But when Injuns are howlin' around, it takes nerve to make a shot like he made. Saved me a wound, I reckon."

He stepped forward and held out two scalps to Ben. In the most friendly manner possible, he said, "I generally keep 'em, because others don't care much and I save 'em. I got reason to keep count. But these are fairly yours, I reckon."

Ben accepted the gift, holding gingerly to the coarse, straight hair of the scalplocks. He bowed a little, remembering his manners. Then inspiration came to him.

"I sure appreciate it, Kelly," he said, "but I'll give them back to you, as a gift from me, for your collection." He handed them back, solemnly, and Kelly's eyes flickered again.

The big man stood for a moment, looking up and down the small figure. He said softly, "That's a genteel thing to do, Ben Palmer. I won't forget you." He raised his hand at Casper and the others, gave them a wolfish smile, and turned on his heel. Before Ben could say Jack Robinson he was gone from sight, the scalps swinging from his belt.

Casper said, "And that's Kelly! There's Injuns would give their lives to know where he caches them scalps. He must have a thousand!"

Ben turned and looked at the others. He said, "Well, he's a great fighter. Cool. He's not a man you could really like, though, is he?"

Casper roared with laughter as the tension broke. The others joined in, going to recapture their packs. Casper said, "No, he ain't a man to cotton to, right off. By golly, Ben, you're a card, now, ain't you?"

But Ben was not attempting to be humorous. Kelly interested him. Kelly was a hero, and Ben meant to be a figure of some consequence himself, so that his name might go back to Susan Cratcorn in such a way that she would know he had made good his promise.

He no longer desired Susan—the laughter had finished that. But he did desire fame, and in this great, unfinished land, so different from Jersey, there seemed to be opportunity to gain this renown. At least, he thought, he had made a start!

Then they came to the river, and there they rested, rehashing the fight, bragging a little, but giving great credit to Kelly for his flanking operation. That, they said, no other white man could possibly have managed, because none other could have gotten around an Indian party to come up on their rear except Kelly the great runner and tracker. Then they told more tales of his prowess until the river boat came nosing through the mist to take them down the Ohio to the Fort.

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FORT TERRY was a bulging pile of blackened logs and stockade fence, but around it had grown a settlement of considerable size and great fertility. The Fort had stood so many sieges without crumbling that the frontier was becoming almost tame, Casper said, half jokingly.

River traffic had become increasingly safe and goods were being floated down to exchange for produce from the farms. Farmers were coming to take up land in the fertile valley, and many of the fiercest chieftains of the various tribes were dead, or had moved west.

They went to see Colonel Brandon, in command of the Fort. Ben found him a stout, agreeable man with pink cheeks and none of the gaunt sobriety of the frontiersman.

He shook hands with Ben and said, "Glad to have another woodsman. Since Wetzel wandered away, we have more need of scouts. Casper, I hear bad news. Winawa is back."

Casper shook his head. "I was afraid of it. Boulogne, too?"

"Yes," said Brandon. "Boulogne and his rum, Winawa and his tribe. Five other chieftains are arrayed with them, our informer tells us. They are up near the Mad River, but are heading this way. I must have information about them."

Casper said, "We're ready to go. Let us go down and drink up and rest."

"If you should see Kelly," said Brandon, frowning a bit, "send him in. I don't like Kelly, but we need him. . . ."

Casper laughed and told him about Kelly. Colonel Brandon pursed his lips, shook his head at the tale of the last Indian, the one Kelly had killed with such obvious enjoyment. He nodded at Ben's part, carefully built up by the kindly Casper.

He said, "Let the others go down and drink rum, young man. I'd like to talk with you."

So Casper and his friends left, and Ben remained in the big house, which was located about two miles west of the Fort itself, upon a fine piece of farm property. The Colonel had certainly prospered—Ben had never seen such a fine house furnishings in the backwash of Jersey. While he sat there, a door opened and a girl came into the room.

She was a small girl, much shorter even than Ben. She had freckles across her nose, which was upturned, and her hair was red and abundant. She wore a gray linsey dress which fitted her quite closely, and her figure was slight and totally un-

like that of Susan Gratcorn. But Ben's eyes would not go away from this tiny girl.

Colonel Brandon said, "My niece, Mary Brandon. Darling, this is a new scout, Ben Palmer."

The girl's eyes were hazel, and very sharp. She said, "I didn't mean to intrude. I thought they were all gone."

However, she did not leave, but busied herself about the room. Colonel Brandon said, "Ben, are you sure you want to join the scouts? I need a farmer to look after my place. It's overlarge, and I'm gouty at times."

Ben said, "Thank you, sir, but I was raised on a farm."

Brandon nodded, as though that was a good answer. "I know. . . . I know. . . . But scouting pays nothing except sustenance. The reward often is death, or worse—capture by Indians. This west will be built by farmers, workers. . . ."

"Saving your presence sir," said Ben calmly, "I did not come here to build the west, but to protect it from depredation. I have no ambition for fortune, only for fame!"

He was very tiny, even standing erect, with his shoulders back, and there were people who would have laughed at his earnestness. But Colonel Brandon did not laugh, nor did the small girl at the far end of the room.

The good Colonel sighed, remembering his own youth, and his service under Lord Dunmore, and the smoke of battle and sound of musketry. The girl stood quite still and her glance was steady upon Ben's tight face.

Colonel Brandon said, "Well, no use to talk against youth, but I do need a farmer. Everyone is so prosperous here he will not work for another, but takes up his own land! Make yourself free of the place, Ben. Mary, take him out and show him the horses. . . ."

Mary came forward without shyness. She said, "We have fine horses. And milk cows. But I guess you wouldn't want to look at a milk cow. . . ."

They looked at each other, and then Ben went outdoors with her and said wonderingly, "How is it that we feel as though we had known each other before?"

Mary Brandon nodded. She said, "Here, on the frontier, I am out of place. I cannot ride the wild steeds, nor plow in the fields. I am too small and weak. Unlike the other men, the big men, you don't stare at me in wonderment. That is all I know—it's comforting to have another little person about."

For once Ben did not bristle at reference to his lack of stature. He understood this girl, and it was in that moment that Susan Gratcorn became a dim memory which in truth was somewhat distasteful. . . .

There was a black colt in the enclosure which held the horses—the corral, Mary called it—and Ben promised to break it and tame it for Mary to ride. They grew very well acquainted in those hours, and Ben ate in the kitchen, a vast, homey room presided over by a giant Negress, and Mary sat with him. Casper and the others got roaring drunk and beat up a couple of farmers that night, but Ben stayed at the Brandon house and drank only cider purveyed by the red-haired, slant-eyed niece of the Colonel.

He was quite at ease, quaffing his third cup, when there was a scratch on the kitchen door and the Negress went to it and peered through a peep hole, then opened it to allow a figure to slip through.

Mary Brandon, across the table from Ben, turned pale as a ghost. She said, "Paddy!"

THE tall man seemed to fill the room. He wore fresh buckskin, fringed and clean, and his mocassins were beaded. His long, black hair was combed to his shoulders and his face was unlined, serene, ugly. His eyes lighted upon Ben, and he smiled, and that was the first time Ben had ever seen Kelly smile. The effect was amazing.

The brown eyes were soft, the slash of a mouth upcurved in gentle lines. Kelly's high, smooth voice said, "I've been looking for you, Ben. They told me you might be held here by the little queen of the settlement." Kelly bowed toward Mary. He was an entirely different man, jolly, tremendously attractive, his ugliness driven from mind by his smile.

Ben said, "You wanted—*me?*"

"Sit down, Paddy," breathed Mary Brandon, and Ben was then aware of the effect of the big man upon the girl. She was flushed, yet in her eyes there was a certain repugnance. She was like a bird charmed by a snake; and the hand that poured cider for the famed scout trembled so that she spilled some on the checkered cloth.

Kelly sat upon a chair and accepted his cup. He said, "Kelly travels alone."

His tone was abrupt—he had a strange habit of plunging into a subject without preamble. "Everyone knows that. Almost no one can keep up with Kelly." For a moment the arrogance crept through, then he leaned forward and fixed Ben with his brown eyes. "But comes a time when a man must use canniness. Winawa, Boulogne, have evaded me for years by strategems. They always ran before I came. If I were beating slowly, with a partner who seems puny—begging your pardon, Ben—they would not run.

"And if that partner was not weak, but a great fighter, a cool man in a pinch, I could take Winawa and Boulogne and this impending war would be averted. You understand?" His very speech was different than when he talked to the scouts, back there in the woods. It was clipped, almost erudite, and Ben could see then that Kelly's mother must have indeed been of quality folk.

Ben said quietly, "I am a greenhorn, Kelly."

The big man leaned back, as though satisfied. Over the edge of the cup he laughed a little. "A week, a month with Kelly—which no man has before been able to take—and you'll be the greatest woodsman on the frontier, next to Kelly, in the West!"

Ben sat quietly, not answering. His eyes went to Mary Brandon, and it seemed impossible that they had only met a few hours before. He sat there, asking her what to do. Without words, he conveyed his message and saw that she knew. . . .

Mary moistened her lips with the end of a red tongue. She said, "Paddy—don't take him. He's new here. He's—he's a farmer. The Colonel needs him."

Kelly laughed softly. "Why, Mary, I'm not taking him unless he wants to go. And if he wants—it must be strongly, to go with Kelly!"

She said, "Don't go, Ben. Paddy is too strong. . . ."

But she knew that was the wrong thing to say, and she desisted. She waited a moment, then said, "But you must go, of course. You came here to find fame, you said. With Paddy you'll become famous—or dead. And that's a chance all men take who dare to chance anything."

Kelly stared at her, then, and put down his cup. Kelly's strange eyes narrowed and he purred in his thin voice, "Mistress Mary, you're a fit queen for a king. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. And I could say still more."

The girl shuddered and rose, still quite pale. She said, "I'll bid you good-bye, for now. I must go to bed. . . ."

She caught Ben's hand, pressed it, averting her eyes from Kelly, striving to cement a bond between herself and the small, still man from Jersey.

She said, "Come back! Get your fame, then come back to the farm. . . ." She was gone.

When Ben turned back, Kelly's face had made one of its startling changes. He was frowning, his mouth was again a stark slit.

He growled, "She's already fond of you. For two years I've—but never mind. Are you ready to come, Ben Palmer?"

Ben said, "After I see Casper, who was kind to me."

"You do not hesitate?" said Kelly curiously.

"I came here to find fame," repeated Ben. "Should I flinch when it is generously offered?"

Kelly extended a huge hand which was sinewy and long, rather than thick and hamlike. Ben's little fist was engulfed in a firm but gentle clasp. In that moment he was amazed that he had never thought Kelly unlikable—he was drawn to the man as never before had he been close to anyone.

And so they went out together, Kelly's long stride eating up two of Ben's short ones. And from a darkened upstairs window Mary Brandon watched them, a prayer upon her lips, her heart in a strange turmoil.

CHAPTER THREE

Death in the Dark

FAR to the northwest of Fort Tarry, Ben lay behind a huge fallen log and listened to Kelly's voice. The scout whispered, although they seemed buried deep in the woods, far from sight or hearing of man.

"Sure, you're weary. No one can keep up with Kelly and not be worn. But you're a tough little man, and you learn quicker than anyone I ever saw or knew. We're comin' close to Winawa's new encampment."

Ben stayed quiet, knowing Kelly needed no response. It had been a bitter time, since leaving Tarry. There had been a million things to learn about the wild life and how it affected tracking, about the topography of the country, about various and sundry Indian signs, wolf signs, bear signs—a myriad of varied signs which were commonplace to Kelly and brand new to Ben. It seemed he would never learn them all.

He remembered Casper's warning when he had departed. "Kelly's one idea is to kill Injuns. He don't really care for his own life nor yours! He'll lead you into hell, and let you get out your own way. That's Kelly!"

Jenkins and Moseby and Patou had nodded solemnly. They had not wanted Ben to go. They had been afraid to speak out in front of Kelly, but Ben—and Kelly—had known. Yet Ben had gone ahead, that very night, and now they were in the country Winawa had picked for his new stronghold, and Ben was thinner, his face strained and his belt tight. His stomach rebelled against jerky for breakfast, jerky at noon, jerky at night, and his hide was prickled and bitten by insects and torn by brambles.

Yet he had learned, and so far as he could, he was ready for any circumstance. Kelly said so, and here in the forest Kelly's word was gospel. In the morning they would begin their toilsome reconnaissance, and Kelly would have a scheme.

Kelly always had a scheme, reflected Ben. He was smart. He should have been a great general—a leader of men, instead of a skulking tracker of savages.

Ben fell asleep. Kelly stopped talking and lay upon his back, staring at the stars. He should have awakened Ben to stand the first watch, but he did not.

He himself watched all through the night, yet in the morning he appeared as fresh as a daisy in a field, and laughed off Ben's protestations with, "I want you sharp as a lynx today. Eat and come along."

Ben could not eat more jerky, but he pretended to do so, and drank heartily at the cool stream upon which they had camped. They started for the hill in the distance, and Kelly had said there would be scout patrols out, so they went quietly through the woods.

It seemed ridiculous, with nothing but wild life about them, but Kelly insisted that they make progress from tree to tree. Ben saw no sign of Indians.

Kelly whispered, about noon, "We must imagine them before we see them. That's the difference between a scout and a damned fool. This is the place for them—therefore they got to be here. Stay behind at this tree and wait for my signal."

Ben waited, seeing to his rifle, loosening his tomahawk in his belt. He had practised with the hatchet, too, on this trip, throwing it at trees under Kelly's direction. He was rather proud of his progress in that science. Ben had a quick eye and marvelous reflexes, so that anything to do with aiming at a mark came easily for him. He drew the Indian small axe which Kelly had given him, and hefted it in his palm.

Kelly was gone up the hill, and there was no sound save the chattering of squirrels, the occasional rustle of a chipmunk rustling for fodder. Yet now the tomahawk froze in Ben's palm. He melted closer to the tree trunk, his senses quickening. It was, Kelly said, like smelling a skunk, only most times there was no actual odor, just the feeling of a foreign, inimical body in the vicinity.

There was no movement. Ben retreated to windward of the tree, crouching, his rifle under one arm, the hatchet in his right hand. If he had to fire a shot, Kelly would be caught in the middle. He stared westward, and after a moment the shadows of the morning sun became clearly defined to his sharp eyes.

He saw a flitting movement. He retreated eastward of his tree. There were some willows nearby, and he longed for their shelter, but he knew better than to attempt them. He remained still.

There was another figure, and another, then more! Ben gasped as the truth began to bear down upon him. For once the great Kelly had miscalculated. Not only had the Wyandots failed to run from him, but they had laid a trap for him.

The ego of Paddy Kelly had not allowed for this. He had been keen enough to realize that they were close to the camp he had never seen, he had come silently and swiftly through the woods with his greenhorn companion, he had allowed for every contingency—save that he had underestimated his enemy.

A tall man in breech clout and war paint, with two feathers knotted into his hair, was gaining on his companions. He was very swift, so that Ben could scarcely detect his movements, despite the fact that all the Indians were close enough to shoot at now. Ben knew it must be Winawa, once Kelly's friend, now his bitter enemy. There were at least twenty others.

They had completed the arc now, and in their eagerness they had not seen Ben at all. He remained where he was.

The Wyandots would not kill Kelly unless they had to, of course. They would attempt to stun him, capture him and put him to torture. Kelly had reasserted this point a thousand times in cautioning Ben not to attempt a vain rescue.

Ben could do nothing but stand and wait, unnoticed, inglorious, while Kelly met his doom.

TWICE he raised the rifle, drawing a bead upon Winawa. Each time the chieftain moved so swiftly the shot was chancey. Ben dared not miss—only by killing Winawa could he throw the attack into confusion, he was aware. He reclaimed the tomahawk.

Before he could act, the war cry sounded. He heard Kelly's shouted defiant answer in the same second, then the unmistakable heavy bang of Kelly's rifle. That would be one dead Indian, Ben knew. He bethought himself of his old tree strategy, and slinging his rifle, he went like a monkey up the trunk.

He had to go high, but he could see the action when he reached the top of the giant oak. Below him, Kelly and the big man were running along the hillside, making such leaping strides that the Indians fell behind.

He prayed a little, aiming the rifle. He banged away. An Indian leaped, rolled down the hill. Kelly's arm flung up in salute, even as he ran, and then Ben knew he had done right.

Of course, the Indians were also aware of him now. He came down out of the tree like a squirrel, loaded his gun and changed position. He found another handy tree and climbed again. When he could see, the scene had changed.

Winawa was running up a ledge of rock, with Kelly beneath him. They were out of range, now, and Ben lowered his rifle, restraining an impulse to shout. Winawa was running on level ground, fleet as a deer. Kelly was still hampered by uneven ground. Indians were swarming from all directions. . . .

Winawa's bronzed, splendid body took off in a flying leap. Before Ben's horrified gaze the chief landed smack atop of the flying Kelly, even while two big braves appeared on the angle from the hilltop and were able to plunge in to the aid of Winawa. Kelly was captured!

Ben stayed in the tree. A party of braves came back and searched diligently for him. He did not move, high up in the branches, hunched in a fork between two hefty limbs. They came beneath the tree several times, talking among themselves in deep gutturals, but they were too excited about catching Kelly.

Kelly had said that Indians were not so imperturbable as most people thought; that when they were elated they became frenzied and lost their heads. Otherwise, said Kelly with reason, they would have easily defeated every white force sent against them, both by superior numbers and by their woods guile and undoubted courage in combat.

Kelly was right, and Ben stayed in the tree until nightfall. Then he came down, although he knew there were still patrols out, and that they would be looking for him. He started for the hilltop where Kelly had been captured, and beyond which must be Winawa's encampment.

The way he started was the way Kelly had taught him. He lay upon the dark ground. He reached out before him, sighting on a tree ahead, until he got a firm grip on the moss. Then, careful of twigs and other obstructions which might rustle, he would pull his body forward. That was slow progress, almost torture. Yet he kept on.

But the Indian who leaned against a tree trunk as sentinel of the farthest outpost of the camp did not hear Ben eeling his way forward. The tomahawk in Ben's hand steadied. He gathered his wiry, short legs under him. He sprang forward and upward in one motion, using the blunt edge of the weapon so as to stun and eliminate outcry.

The savage fell without a word. The hardest thing Ben ever had to do came next. He almost closed his eyes as he reversed the hatchet and sunk it into the skull of the unconscious Indian.

He crept on, to the top of the hill. In his mouth there was a strange, bitter taste. He could not keep his thoughts from Mary Brandon, her strange demeanor when Kelly had entered the room, her actual horror of the man, even through the fascination his presence held for her, something no one could fathom. . . .

Killing in the dark—that was a strange pastime for a Jersey farm boy who sought fame!

Yet he must go on—Kelly was a prisoner, and what they would do to Kelly was worse than murder, either in deepest night or brightest day. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Buckskin and Iron

THERE were fires in the night. The Wyandots were far from a white settlement; they had patrols all through the land, they were unafraid of attack.

Ben clung to the other side of the hill, getting his eyes accustomed to the scene. There seemed to be hundreds of the lodges and wigwams on the bank of the stream. In the dim light of the fires there was a milling of many bodies, shouts came up to Ben's ears.

In the center of the scene was a larger tepee than the others, and a grouping of the wigwams about it made a clearing. There came a brighter light as fuel was added to the fire in that space, and the Indians remained a respectful distance but continued to circle and to cry out.

Kelly was bound to a post. There was blood. Men bore faggots and piled them, loosing at them.

Kelly's head was high, Ben saw. Winawa, pretending to ignore him, leaned majestically against another post. Ben could imagine the taunts which Kelly was loosing at them.

A fat-bodied, gross man in buckskin came out of a tepee, followed by two squaws and a couple of half-grown brats. He was, by his walk, a white man. He went up to Kelly and ponderously swung a fist against Kelly's face, and then Ben knew that was the Frenchman, Francois Boulogne, who had joined the Wyandots to escape Kelly's vengeance.

Ben froze there, watching the brave man. Even Winawa reached out and restrained Boulogne, who would have struck again. Kelly's mouth moved in the ever-increasing light of the fire, and Ben could imagine the brown eyes, turned red, spitting venomous hatred more rapidly than Kelly's quick tongue.

It was a ghastly, fascinating show, and Ben had a grandstand seat. He could stay, and then backtrack to the Fort and warn the Colonel.

The Colonel could send for precious reinforcements and be ready for the attack upon Fort Tarry. It was Ben's duty to follow this course, and well he knew it.

Still, Ben remained under the clump of willows. Solemnly, he was weighing the situation, weighing himself.

Had he stayed on Colonel Brandon's farm, he would have taken the road to fortune. That was simple, and Ben was essentially a simple person. That would have been another thing, a different thing.

But he had averred that he came West for fame. He had refused the advice of Casper. He had elected to go with Kelly, to seek advancement in the eyes of strong men.

He had been wrong, he knew now. Not because disaster had fallen, not because Kelly was taken and he himself was helpless and forlorn upon his hill, with the

road to fame blocked by an avalanche.

But he was wrong because he no longer had reason to garner fame. Susan Gratcorn and her laughing swain wee no longer of any consequence. Ben Palmer was out on a limb, with nothing to hope for should he be able to cling to it safely. The only thing he wanted, he found now, was to return to the small, understanding girl with the red hair and hazel eyes.

Of course he could not do that. He had set his feet upon a course and it must be followed. There was in his small frame no compromise with fate. He started edging down toward the stream of water.

It took a thousand years to reach that water. From the village came shouts, from time to time, great loud noises of pleasure, and what they were doing to poor Kelly Ben could only imagine. But he kept edging for that water.

There was another sentinel, this one wide awake and disgruntled because he could not be in on the death of Kelly.

Ben jumped upon his back and holding the scalplock with one hand, drew his razor-sharp knife across the throat. He picked up the man's rifle.

He found the stream shallow enough to wade and deep enough to immerse himself if necessary to avoid detection from the bank. He dared not remove any of his clothes in fear of what might come, if his reckless and daring plan was successful.

He wondered a little if fame would come to him after he died; if the Indians would tell his story and if it would get back to Fort Tarry. He thought it might, and the idea gave him pleasure, for he knew Mary Brandon would understand.

That was the thing about her, that instant understanding which had flashed between them, almost visible, cementing them in one common bond. He went on, above the camp, to where he heard the nicker of horses.

He was a farm boy; he knew horses probably better than the average frontiersman of his time.

So he came up to the band of hobbled Indian horses without disturbing them. The stunted ponies nuzzled the little man who walked among them with a plaited rope he had loosed. He found hackamores and placed them on a dozen of the steeds. He ran the rope from one to the other, through the bone rings of the hackamores, until he had them loosely strung together.

The time had come to take action. He waited a moment, holding the end of his rope. He picked out a gray mustang upon which to ride, petted it, soothing it. He took a hitch at his wet pants, removed the tomahawk from his belt, put his knife at hand. He had all the horses loose, now.

An Indian came reluctantly to check upon the mounts. Ben slid under his horse's belly and waited. The brave grunted, sensing something wrong. Ben hit him.

This time he was taut and ready to die, but he had a plan and he was going to execute it as his last act on earth.

HE SLIPPED easily onto the back of the gray. He rode in a little circle, managing the others as easily as though he had trained them, chirping between his lips. He got the main body of the herd ahead of him. He arranged his dozen in the rear. He gathered his breath, and let out a howl that could have come from a covey of banshees.

In a moment the stampeding animals were dancing and driving through the street. Braves sprang up waving their arms, attempting to head them off. Squaws scuttled from underfoot. A clear path to the wigwam of Winawa and the clearing where Kelly was bound appeared as if by magic.

Ben rode low, his sharp eyes alert, clinging to the gray with his knees. Then he saw Kelly.

The big man's head was up, his eyes alert. They had his hands still bound, but they had tied him to a short rope which allowed him to walk. They had been on the point of strewing bright hickory charcoal beneath his feet, for his last dance.

The rope went around the post. In the bright light, it was a shining mark. Ben held the knife in one hand, the tomahawk in his right fist. He came down behind the horses, directing the twelve with the rope in his teeth. He jerked his head once, almost dislodging all his molars. The twelve obediently swerved for the chief's tent, forming a barricade of horse flesh between Ben and the stake where Kelly waited.

There was no time for cutting Kelly

loose. There was no chance, as braves realized what went on, and dashed for weapons. Ben had to try it, though. He leaned out a little and gauged the speed of his horse, the short distance to the post. His arm went out. He tossed the hatchet, using his wrist for accuracy rather than his arm for speed.

The tomahawk sped through the air. Kelly stood very still, his eyes following its course. It glinted in the firelight, and a squaw shrieked. A pony kicked at Francois Boulogne, upsetting him. Ben rode behind the flight of his axe.

The sharp edge thudded into the pole. Kelly leaped forward. The axe had cut the rope which held him captive!

Ben was leaning farther out. Kelly turned, quick-witted as ever despite the scars upon him, his face, black painted for the burning. Ben reached and slashed at the thongs which tied Kelly's hands behind him. Kelly whirled with magic speed. A buckskin pony came running. Kelly reached for the mane, made a leap.

Shots sounded, now, but Kelly was on the horse's back. Ben rode hard and low, kicking the ribs of the gray. They went for the end of the village street, straight through milling, yowling braves.

Hands snatched at them, and Ben slashed and cut with the knife, red bodies fell away. Kelly beat at them with fists of iron. Arrows hummed around them, crude leaden slugs cut the wind above their heads.

They reached the end of the avenue of wigwams. Kelly, in the lead, swerved right, up the hill. Ben kicked his pony up and came abreast.

"Not that way!" he panted. "Around, and over the plain below. We can get clean away from them and back to the Fort. We can take the low road and warn the Colonel!"

Kelly sat up straight, riding the horse easily. He said, "By Gad, I came here to kill Indians! I want Winawa and Boulogne, and I'm going to have them!"

"The Fort!" said Ben. "They're started, now. They'll move, now that we got away!"

Kelly said, "I want Winawa and Boulogne!" and his eyes were mad again.

Kelly was slowing down. The pursuit was forming. The big man said calmly, "Ben, that was the greatest stunt was ever pulled on the Border. I'm not forgetting it. You ride for Tarry. I'll round up a gun from these redskins and tree me my men. Go ahead, Ben."

They were halfway up the hill. Ben trembled a little, but he said, "Let me tether the horses. They understand me." He got down, ignoring Kelly's further pleading for him to go. He hobbled the horses with the two hobbles he'd had the foresight to string at his belt.

For once Kelly followed in silence, knowing Ben had something in mind. After a moment, Ben got oriented and found the spot. He pointed, and Kelly exclaimed at the dead sentry with his rifle and horn and bullet pouch intact.

They worked their way half down the hill. Winawa was immediately discernible, shouting orders, rallying the panicked Indians. Boulogne was examining the spot where the pony had belted him.

It was a downhill, a long shot. Ben would never have attempted it. But Kelly sighted, lowered his gun, placed a ball, the horn and a patch close at hand, then raised the long barrel once more.

As calmly as though on a turkey hunt, Kelly pressed the trigger of the strange Indian gun.

It was Boulogne who collapsed. The fat man seemed punctured, like a balloon. He fell face forward, into the fire, and by the way his arms waved, Ben knew he still lived with his flesh scorching in the embers intended for Kelly.

Kelly's rapidity of motion was unbelievable. He was reloading the gun in the time another man would take to empty a smidgin of powder. This time he scarcely aimed, for Winawa was already running, sprinting for dear life away from the light and danger. The gun banged once.

Winawa gave one more leap, straight into the air. As if by magic, the Indian village was stricken by silence. Their chief lit uopn his feet, staggered forward, wailed once, and went down like a felled ox.

They mounted and Kelly headed for the plain, but first he paused and said, "That was a strange thing. It was so easy, killing them. My parents will rest easy now, Ben!"

Kelly's voice was boyish and smooth again, almost a treble, and he was filled with peace, Ben knew. And they rode through the night, scarcely stopping before they came inside the stockade of Fort Tarry.

MARY BRANDON sat in the big kitchen, with the pitcher of cool cider before her. Kelly had just finished his tale. There was a great difference in Kelly, now. He was all his seldom-seen gracious self, but it was deeper than that. He lacked something that had been in him before, some underlying tragic force.

He ended, "Ben came down and got me. That's all." He arose and looked down at them. He said softly, "Casper and the others are waiting for me. We're going to scout the thing and see if the war is over before it begins, thanks to Ben. He's won his fame. . . ."

"I'll go, too," said Ben.

Kelly shook his head. "You'll stay. You'll farm. You will marry Mary Brandon, get rich—and die in bed. But you'll never forget Kelly—and you'll be known the whole West over as the man who was big enough to pull Kelly out of a hole he got into by his own brash foolishness!"

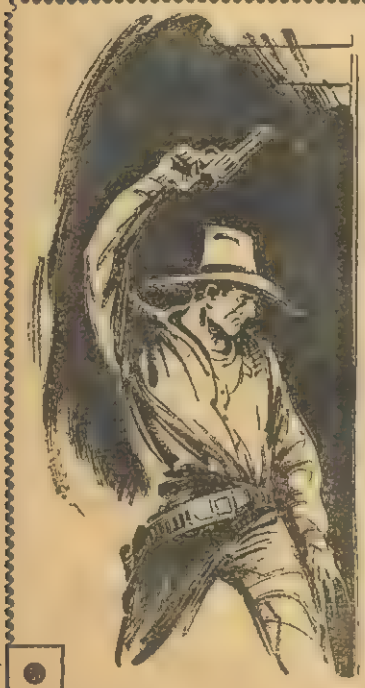
He bowed once to Mary and for a second his eyes shone redly, the old way. He snatched her hand, kissed it fervently. Then he was gone out of the door and the two small people sat and looked at each other. It was as if a great gusty wind had passed over them, leaving them in peace.

Mary said, "That was a bold thing he said—about us."

"But Kelly is usually right," said Ben.

It wasn't necessary to grab her, or to humble himself, or to do anything but sit there and let their great understanding take its course. The little people would build the West, if they had the courage and the knowledge and iron and buckskin in their hearts. . . .

THE END



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ALL STORIES NEW ALL STORIES COMPLETE

Spurs raking, he swept from the brush, blazing Colt in his hand.

By M. HOWARD LANE

GUNS UP FROM TEXAS

Young Cass Spicer was either very foolish or very reckless when he agreed to go along with those two road-agents to stick up the Butterfield stage. . . . But he was even more foolish—or imbued with a madman's recklessness—when he thought that, as the only living witness to that frontier murder, he could escape the renegade guns which must silence his lips forever!

HE WAS out of Texas where the Rangers searched for him, and thus beyond their jurisdiction. However, he was not beyond the range of bounty-hunters who could collect a fancy penny by taking him back to the Lone Star State, dead or alive.

Cass Spicer thought of this bleakly as his gaunt mount quickened its pace at sight of town lights glowing ahead through prairie dark. The community, he knew, was called Cartright—a raw young granger town built alongside the cattle trail to Dodge.

A tall, lean, brown man, Cass stared at the friendly lamps lighting the velvet night and his lips were hard as twisted iron. He knew why his fagged mount had broken into a trot. The animal sensed food, shelter, and companionship.

Those were the things they'd both had, Cass reflected, but Red Paxton and Bate Calvert had changed all that.

Less than thirty days ago those two names had meant nothing to him, yet they had been the ones to set him riding this endless fugitive trail. Like a picture etched in red, the memory of the night they had visited his Texas Sand Hills camp came back to Cass.

Drifting strangers, they had stopped off at his lonesome line shack, and he had been glad to have their company. They had broken out a bottle and fed him whisky until his head had started thumping like a smith's hammer on an anvil.

Then Red Paxton had mentioned a way for a forty-dollar cowpoke to become independent overnight. All Cass Spicer had to do was ride with them to a canyon along the Bennet stage road, and hold their horses while he and Bate Calvert stopped the Butterfield coach, and lifted a strong-box they happened to know it was carrying.

"We'll cut the gold three ways, cowboy," Paxton had drawled. "One hour's work and you'll be back here with ten thousand in your belt. Won't be no witnesses to ever know you've been gone from here, and if the Rangers get snoopy and ride this way, you can mighty easy swear that we boys spent the night with you."

That golden prospect had dazzled him, Cass recalled, but before agreeing to accompany them he had made one point clear. "I don't hold with killin'," he had told them. "Gold ain't worth it."

Bate Calvert had laughed. "Why, we don't neither, Spicer. 'Shore not—you don't need worry about anybody dyin'! That box is all we want, not a bunch of corpses hanging around our necks!"

He'd been pretty easy to convince, Cass admitted to himself now. Whisky had helped make it simple, and everything had gone smooth and easy.

"You won't need no mask, Spicer," Red Paxton had said as Cass held their mounts behind brush that grew from the rim of the narrow wash through which the stage would pass. "Nobody will see you. All yuh got to do is set tight. Me'n Bate are old hands at this sort of thing."

That admission should have been warning enough, but it wasn't until he saw Calvert and Paxton drop from bank to stage deck, and murder the old driver with one bludgeoning Colt blow that he realized the coach robbers' plan was to kill all the passengers—leave no witnesses behind!

Sight of that ruthless killing had cleared his mind of whisky fumes. Spurs raking, he had swept from the brush, blazing Colt in his own hand. A pair of fast guns from inside the rocking Concord had promptly answered him—guns held in the hands of a neighborhood Texas Ranger!

Cass had felt the howl of lead about his unmasked head, and he had yelled desperately, "I'm tryin' to help you. . . ." But the roar of Colt fire had drowned his words.

With a hornets' nest of death beneath them, Calvert and Paxton had been forced to jump, their mission unaccomplished. And Ranger lead, searing the flank of Cass Spicer's mount, had put the animal into an ungovernable run. Cass had let the horse go, his head whirling with unanswered fears. He had recognized the face of the Ranger at the coach window, and he felt certain the Ranger had also recognized him.

Panic had seized a cowpoke, unused to the devious trails of outlawry. Bate and the redheaded Paxton would be looking for him with lead, to close the only mouth that could testify against them. And on the morrow Ranger and sheriff posses would be scouring the county for him.

Thus, with nothing but the clothes on his back and the few dollars left from his last pay check, Cass Spicer had pointed the nose of his roan toward the Red River, and the lawless territories beyond.

Up the long cattle-trail from the Red, Cass had ridden, a hunted man and knowing it. For another owlhooter on the run had given him the information that Cass Spicer's face was scattered all over Texas with the dodgers offering a thousand dollar reward for him, dead or alive. The owlhooter had also said that a pair of hombres named Red Paxton and Bate Calvert had made their brag in the town of Bennet that they would run down Spicer and collect the bounty on his head.

Now that it was too late, Cass knew that he had acted like a skulking coyote. A man with guts would have ridden in to Bennet and told the truth, and taken his medicine.

"You're yellow," he cursed himself bitterly. "You got a streak of it a foot wide up your backbone!"

HE HAD admitted his guilt by fleeing, Cass realized, and now the long fugitive trail stretched ahead of him into an endless running future. He was safe from Texas Law, but Red Paxton and Bate Calvert were on his trail.

"Are you going to keep on running the rest of your life?" Cass asked himself fiercely. "Or are you going to stand your hand and fight for a chance to live free —now that you're out of Texas?"

The lights of the new granger town of Cartright drawing slowly closer seemed to mock him. There were peace in those raw, new homes ahead. Men were able to enjoy the ease of evening at the end of an honest day's work, for they were not fugitives fleeing the Law and bounty-hunters.

Cass studied the warm glow inside those buildings he could see, and they made him feel hungry, but not for food. The hunger in him was for something different, something a little hard to define. At last Cass found an answer: A fugitive was a man treading quivering quicksand. Those honest grangers building the new trail-side community, were men with their feet set on solid rock.

Cass felt his toes curl inside his boots, and he jammed his feet strongly against stirrup bows. The pressure felt good. Those families up ahead had what he wanted. They were breaking sod in a new land, where every man had a right to a fresh start!

Yes, here a man could sink his roots and start new. "And I'm goin' to do it," Cass Spicer reached his decision. "I'm going to hang my hat in Cartright and find out whether my meat is yellow or red! It's as good a place as any to wait for Paxton and Calvert!"

As he rode into the head of the town's single wide street, Cass pushed thought of those bounty-hunters from his mind and surveyed Cartright.

Here was a farmers' town built alongside the cattle trails that led north to Dodge.

These rich bottomlands in the wide bosque of the Arkansas were ideal for farms, and the cattle trail, where even now herds were bedded down, brought men with money in their jeans. The future looked bright here for the peaceful folk who were building the community.

"And I'll make mine as bright," Cass smashed the saddle-horn with his clenched fist, "or find out how much lead I can eat!"

Light splashed across the hot dust from the suddenly opened door of a small millinery store ahead of him, and Cass saw a girl's tall, slender shape come down the steps to street level. She moved toward a light farm wagon, its team standing placid at a hitch rail across the boardwalk.

At the same time a pair of Texas drovers batted through the swing doors of a saloon, set incongruously alongside the ladies' hat shop. Both of them saw the girl, and one of them whistled. It was not a nice whistle. Almost opposite the wagon now, Cass watched the girl's head snap erect in stiff anger.

"Hyar, lass," one of the cowpokes called. "Don't you go strainin' yourself gettin' into that wagon. We'll he'p you over the wheel, even if you are a sod-bustin' wench!"

"Miss Wharton is my fiancée," a stiff voice said as a man in the bulky clothes of a farmer came from the millinery. He started toward the girl, and the two drovers moved forward at the same time.

There was going to be trouble. The electric prescience of it suddenly filled the air. Cass sensed it even before the three men came together at the hitch rack.

"Sodbuster," the Texican's voice was suddenly mean, "sodbuster don't you try tellin' a Texas man what to do. Wouldn't surprise me none if we even stole a kiss from this pretty little girl."

"Why, damn you—" the farm youth began.

"Luke, don't!" It was the girl's voice crying his name. Cass watched her clutch at Luke's arm, and watched him shake her off. The young farmer launched a clumsy haymaker at his lanky Texas tormentor. The blow slid harmlessly off the drover's shoulder but Cass knew what might happen.

His feet hit the ground, and he leaped past the endgate of the wagon, but even as he moved he knew that he had waited too long to stop this thing.

The farmer's Texican assailant had back-stepped a pace, and his gun had cleared holster leather. One shot thundered through the quiet of the night, and Luke staggered, a hurt, surprised look on his face as he reached for his chest.

"You shouldn't a-gone for to do that—" Blood, boiling from between his lips,

choked the young farmer's sentence. A sob in her threat, the Wharton girl tried to hold him on his feet, but the man's weight was too much for her strength. She dropped to the boardwalk with him, screaming.

"Texas men do what they want around you damned sodbusters!" the Texican's voice was rough with the effect of the drinks he had consumed.

CASS SPICER hardly recognized the flat, chill sound of his own voice as he stepped in. He had his Colt in his hand, muzzle wavering lazily to cover the two Texans. The tall

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one who had shot down the granger started to swing his gun around.

"Don't!" Cass clipped the word.

The shorter of the two trail drivers stood with his mouth hanging loosely open, and fear was beginning to break through the alcohol that had fogged his brain. But the killer was still arrogant as he let his gun thump to the walk, and glanced over the fugitive.

Cass wasn't much to look at. The mark of hard travel and little food lay on him. It had gaunted his face, given it a hunted look. Roan-hued stubble lay thick along his jaws, but his eyes were steady on either side of his long, straight nose. Wide lips flattened, he stood the scrutiny of the Texican, and the gun in his fist continued its slow movement.

"Why, yuh look like a Texas man yoreself!" the killer suddenly blurted. "Take that hog-leg off me. Us Texas men stick together!"

"*This* Texas man," Cass told him flatly, "doesn't stick to your kind. Grangers have got as much right here in Kansas as you. It's going to be their farms that will make this country live long after the railroads run you drovers out of business. If they got a calaboose in this town," he added, "you two jiggers are going into it. And I'm seein' that you get there!"

"We got a calaboose, all right," a Kansan said from the boardwalk, "but no marshal to run it. Last one we had took a deputy's job at better pay in Dodge, and our town council ain't got around to appointin' a new one. This is the first trouble we've had with Texas men, but," he added gloomily, "I'm afeard it won't be the last."

A crowd had gathered about the sullen pair Cass was holding under his gun. A sharp glance showed him a preponderance of grangers, but the sprinkling of Texas men who had been attracted by the gunshot were armed, and most of the farmers weren't. Tension was already high, and he could feel it mounting by the moment. One hot word from either group to spark the powder and violence would flare.

His eye caught the solid, powerful shape of the grizzled, white-haired granger who had been doing the talking. "Lead the way," he said curtly. "There's time enough for talk after these men are behind bars."

Mary Wharton's voice came to Cass, and her words eased a little of the crowd tension. "Luke's not dead." A doctor, hastily summoned, had been working over the prone farmer. He murmured something softly to the girl, and she said aloud, "Doctor Moore gives him a fighting chance to live!"

"Bueno!" Cass said crisply. "Come on, open up, you men!" There was authority in his voice that he hadn't known he possessed.

With the grizzled granger pressing his own farm friends back, Cass prodded the sullen pair along behind him. His own

back tingled as he passed the Texican trail crew.

One of them flung a warning at him. "You're a Texas man yourself by the look of you, mister, else you wouldn't be taking Tuck and McDell to the calaboose. But be careful. Take good care of those boys, or hunt yourself a big hole!"

"They'll get fair treatment," Cass said through stiff lips. "Kansas has courts to take care of things like this."

Texas had courts, too, was the grimly ironic thought that passed through his mind as he spoke. Courts that would convict him if he ever got across the Red!

Ten minutes later, the sullen pair were behind the barred door of one of the jail's two big cells. The round-faced McDell plainly showed his worry. "Tuck was all likkered up," he said, "and I guess I was, too. Otherwise we wouldn't have made no trouble. Remember that, Texan."

Straight-lipped, Cass nodded. "I'll remember," he said quietly, and with the keys to the cell jingling from a ring in his hand, he started back down the short corridor to the former marshal's office.

In the doorway he paused, blinking. A half dozen sober-faced grangers were grouped along one wall, with the grizzled oldtimer who had done the previous talking was standing a little in front of them. Ranged opposite, were three saddle-brown Texans, the cut of their clothes showing them to be the men who were likely the owners of the herd on the prairie.

"Cramer's my name," the grizzled granger introduced himself. "Karl Cramer. These here boys behind me are the town council I mentioned. They was rounded up after the shootin' and follered us down here."

One of the Texans spoke. A grizzled old cowman with the mark of many hard-working years on his face, he said, "My handle's Barrett, and part of that herd out on the bedground is mine. We've had some tough years without markets for our beef. Now we got good goin' to Dodge. I hate to think of havin' to fight grangers every foot of the way, and I for one figger that if a lawman whom grangers and Texicans can both trust rods a town, there won't be no trouble."

Cass could see what was coming now, and the knowledge brought a hard, sickening lump into his stomach. He wet his lips.

The granger Cramer's face was earnest as he spoke. "We've all seen our tough times, Texican and farmer alike. Seems like to me that Nature makes it tough enough on a fella without him wasting his time battling his fellow man. Sodbuster, or cowpoke, we're all brothers under the hide. So what we all sorta decided while you were locking up that loco pair is that Cartright needs a man of your shape to wear the marshal's star!"

Cass stared at the badge and he felt cold sweat start on his forehead. Now he knew how a cornered animal must feel.

"Yuh — yuh don't even know my name!" he said hoarsely.

"Names don't mean much," Cramer said gently. "It's the man wearin' the handle who counts. Some of us heard what you told that loco pair about every man havin' an equal right to live in Kansas. We knew then you'd be the right one to wear this star."

"We feel the same about it, son," Barrett put in heartily. "Yore cut will suit the trail crews."

Again Cass was interrupted before he could speak. Tuck's loud voice with an odd note of triumph in it came winging down the corridor behind him. "Hey!" he started yelling. "Hey, some of you hombres come back here! I got somethin' worth tellin'."

Cass made no move to clear the doorway as Cramer started toward him. "I think I can tell you what he wants," the fugitive said flatly. "He's probably recognized me from a Texas Ranger dodger that he's seen on the trail. My name's Cass Spicer, and it's plastered all over Texas, with Butterfield offering a thousand dollars reward for my hide, dead or alive. I ain't guilty, and there's two hombres named Red Paxton and Bate Calvert, who can prove it.

"When I came out of Texas, I came on the run, with the Rangers houndin' my britches. If I'd had guts I'd have stayed in Texas until I found me that Paxton and Calvert. But there was yellow a foot wide up my back. So I ran. Lookin' at the lights of your town tonight set me to thinkin' that here was the place where a man could start fresh. I figgered to dig

in. Now I'm goin' to dig out—and fast!"

CASS saw startled expressions cross the faces of his listeners, and he smiled mirthlessly. "Not the way you think," he told them. "I'm startin' back for Texas to find me that pair of bounty-hunters who made their brag in Bennet that they'd collect Butterfield's thousand. After I find 'em I'll be headin' back thisaway—if I'm able. You gents willin' to hold this job open for awhile?"

"We sure are!" Karl Cramer said emphatically. "Ain't no yellow in a man who'll talk like you've just done—"

"Mebbe no yellow, but a lot of dollars!" the voice had the grit of long travel in it, as the half-opened door was kicked wide.

Light from the hanging lamp in the center of the office ceiling spread its glow over the curly red hair of the stocky Red Paxton man poised in the opening. Like a grinning death's head above one of his hunched shoulders, loomed the wizened face of his taller partner, Bate Calvert. Dust layered the clothes of the bounty-hunters but the bright sheen of the pair of Colts in their fists was undimmed.

And abruptly Cass knew that the bounty-hunting pair had no intention of taking him back to Texas alive!

Red Paxton noticed the heavy ring of keys Cass was holding in his right hand, and the grin on his wide lips widened. A man couldn't drop those keys and drag a Colt before lead seived him. It gave him time to throw a blunt warning.

"Draw cards in this game, any of yuh, and it'll make you as guilty as this cuss. We ain't hankerin' for trouble with any of yuh. Spicer's our man. Folks out on the street told us there'd been a leetle ruckus, and that some of yuh were down here, includin' a cuss answering to Spicer's description. So we left our broncs and moseyed here on foot. Now you better make yore peace, Spicer."

One weapon he had and one only, for the rest of the men in this room had ostentatiously come unarmed to offer him the marshal's star. Then, suddenly, Cass realized that he had a second weapon. He had talk—words!

He forced a smile that was hard coming to his lips. "You're a mite late, Red," he said coolly. "Killing me won't do you boys much good. I got a couple of jiggers locked up in the calaboza who are willin' to claim they saw you shove a gun in my ribs and make me ride with you to hold up that stage. They'll testify for me in turn for being turned loose. So I'm afeard you'll have three of us to put away."

"You're lyin'!" Paxton's face contorted. "Nobody saw us ride from your camp—"

He had been tricked into an admission that all these men had heard. His eyes flickered momentarily toward the silent watchers of this drama, and Cass chose the instant to make his bid for life. He flung the heavy key ring straight at the red-headed bounty-hunter.

"Duck, Red!" Bate Calvert yelled, and his own Colt blazed.

Cass felt the rip of lead through his leg, and the last fear he'd had concerning his own courage faded, for the jolting pain seemed almost pleasant.

He saw the key ring strike the red-head full in the face, and the blow half blinded Paxton, forcing his first lead high above the crumpling fugitive. Before he could trigger a second time, Cass had his own Colt out of leather.

The sights centered Paxton's wide middle, and he pulled the trigger. The red-head caught the slug full in his belly, and the force of it turned him as he fell.

That move exposed the cadaverous Calvert, and Cass centered him with a second deliberately aimed slug. Lead puffed dust from the bounty-hunter's vest, and Calvert's eyes grew wide with the fear of what he was seeing in a dark beyond, which no living man ever views.

They were all rushing forward then, grangers not used to brutal death, a little pale around the lips. Texicans, hardened to frontier living, grinning wolfishly.

The cattleman, Barrett, was the first to reach Cass. "Son," he drawled, "if any of us needed proof about your being our A-1 candidate for marshal, we're satisfied now. This word will travel the trail, and I'll see that it gits back to Texas and the right ears. I wouldn't be a mite surprised if them dodgers were pulled off the market, right sudden!"

ROBUSTO'S BULLET BLESSING

Who but Friar Robusto, that strange Six-Shooter Saint of the Sierras, would trust his life either to his piety or his pistols in the lawless Caves of the Owls country, even when the beautiful daughter of Don Feliz was held there for ransom?

CHAPTER ONE

The Hand of Gordo Salgado

IT WAS not often Friar Robusto spared his *huaraches* when traveling from one place to another. But this day the road stretched interminably under

A Friar Robusto Novelette

★ ★ By HARRY F. OLMSTED ★ ★

Impelled by the thought that death stared him in the face, Robusto found swiftness and strength. . . .

a hammering sun and the famous mendicant, returning to San Gabriel from a visit to Los Angeles, turned his head to observe the four-horse coach overtaking him, the two matched teams scudding easily, the wheels kicking up a great dust, the two passengers cool and at ease on their padded seats under the canopy.

Perhaps the discomfort of the sun imparted to Robusto some pitiful appeal. Or maybe it was the wistfulness in his face. At any rate, something impelled the driver to halt his teams and the man behind the curtains to stick out his head. A distinguished looking man with a grizzled, square-cut beard, his eyes lighted at sight of Robusto.

"Padre!" he cried. "God's Word, would you addle your brains, exposing them to such a sun? And you with your fresh-shaven head as bare of cover as a baby's bottom. Get in, Friar. 'Tis no day to be afoot on the road. Get in."

"You are kind," murmured Robusto. "And, if it please you, I shall be happy to ride as far as your Rancho Triunfo." He

stamped his dusty sandals on the step and ducked through the door held open for him. "The kindness of Don Feliz Maytorena has not been exaggerated."

"*Tararira!*" The ranchero laughed. "Tosh! Friar, this is my young one, Trinidad."

Robusto's eyes went to the beautiful young girl, but she did not look at him. Instead, she turned her shoulder with disdain and stared out the coach window at the baking landscape.

Don Feliz said: "Forgive her the bad manners, Friar. She is angry at me."

"One so young and so beautiful should find laughter," said Robusto.

She flung about, her lovely oval face dark. "What is there to laugh about?" she demanded. "My father has the ideas of a barbarian. He plans to have me locked up in a convent, and—"

"She speaks in heat, Friar. I only wish to have her enter the Convent of the Immaculate Heart, in Los Angeles, to finish her education."

"I don't want any more education," snapped Trinidad. "I am eighteen. At my age, my mother had been married two years. My father wants me to be an old maid."

"Ah," said Robusto.

"When a girl marries," said Don Feliz, gloomily, "there must be a suitable groom."

"One with foolish family pride," said the girl, stiffly. "I want none of such. I love Diego. If I cannot have him, I shall take poison."

"Ah!" said Robusto. "For shame." But he winked at Don Feliz. "What Diego?"

"Diego Trevino," said the ranchero, lifting his nose. "A low and vulgar vaquero, without so much as a horse to his name. He smells of horse and leather and talks nonsense because he has had no schooling and knows nothing better. I should rather see you in your coffin, *querida,* than in such a man's arms."

"You will probably have your wish," said the girl, again turning her back. "But Diega smells not half as bad as that *simplon,* Mateo Cansino, whom you wish me to marry. And he has as much as you had, when you married."

Silence fell upon the three of them and Robusto studied. The rift beween father and daughter was as old as time, and as unbridgeable. Both right and wrong. The friar knew the youngster, Diego Trevino; had known him for several years, part of which time he had herded the mission cattle. He knew him as a wild, laughing, healthy young animal, with more than the usual gift of brains, personality and resourcefulness.

In this vigorous new land, with its growing opportunities, Diego would do all right for himself and the girl he took for a bride. But how to make this proud *hacendado* see it, and how to show him the way to retreat gracefully?

That was Robusto's problem, and he was steeling himself to tackle its solution when Trinidad screamed faintly and recoiled from the coach window.

For an instant, Robusto thought her bee-stung. Then the enhanced roll of hoof-echoes struck in at him. A high pitched whoop dovetailed into the driver's calming call to his team. The coach shuddered to the sudden braking, swerved to a halt. Harsh voices sounded.

Don Feliz, with a puzzled scowl, said: "By my conscience, what happens?" He stuck his head outside and jerked it back instantly. "*Robadores!*" he gasped. "Road agents!"

TRINIDAD, frightened into silence and holding her hands to her mouth as if by force to restrain her will to scream, turned pleading eyes to the friar.

Robusto said: "Peace, my children. These highwaymen are after gold, always after gold. They will not harm you."

"Of course." Don Feliz patted his daughter's shoulder. "Do not fear, my dear. These fellows are annoying, not dangerous."

The coach door was jerked open and a face seemed to fill the opening. It was a face more notable for size than for the evil reflected upon it. It sat upon several layers of chin, the cheeks so wide and heavy they sagged on either side, drawing the lips down at the corners. Below the face was a gross body that made a man wonder that any horse could carry it.

Gordo Salgado, currently the greatest scourge along Alta California's unpoliced highroads, had none of the usual fat man's easy-to-look-at qualities. There was a snaky loathsomeness about him. And his beady, black eyes were like nothing so much as those of a reptile. They fixed upon Robusto with such diabolic intensity he instinctively signed the cross between them.

A soundless laugh shook the *bandido* and he shifted his gaze to the girl. She shuddered, hid her eyes, and then Gordo Salgado was looking at the *ranchero*. "*Buenos dias,* Sêñor Maytorena." His voice was low, throaty, rough. "Very hot, no? Gordo does not venture out into the cruel sun unless the reason is pressing. You understand?"

Don Feliz flushed. "What do you want?"

"Money, my dear man. The root of all evil, if you ask the good friar, whose life is spent begging it. The wicked stuff that drives good men into a life of banditry and crime. But we waste time. I happen to know you have withdrawn from your bankers the sum of ten thousand *pesos de oro*. Let me have it, please."

Don Feliz laughed, a nervous sound. "Why should I be carrying so much money around for highwaymen to steal?"

"Why?" Again that soundless belly laughter. "Why else than to buy the interest of the proud young *hidalgo,* Don Mateo Cansino, in your lovely daughter, señor? And cheap at twice the price, no? So you will really be out the nothing for giving me these moneys. Quick, señor! I am a man of little patience, for all my heft."

"You are misinformed," said Don Feliz coldly, and the sudden sobbing of Trinidad was like a knife in Robusto's heart. Fierce anger flamed inside him. All he wanted now was to meet violence with violence and end the career of this lawless terrorist who had thumbed his nose at the authorities and carried his reckless raids even into Los Angeles. But two things deterred Robusto.

This was just another of the times when he dared not reveal the secrets of the pocketed girdle he wore under his cassock; when he dared not risk his position among the mendicants of the Californias. Moreover, Gordon had a sizable force with him; Robusto could hear the murmur of their voices as they twitted the helpless driver.

"Only a man lower than a dog will bring tears to an innocent girl," he told the glowering bandit. "The don says he has not this money. Begone, *maldito,* before I call down the curse of heaven upon your evil head!"

"You think," chimed in Don Feliz, "that I would be fool enough to bring that amount of money, when I can have it sent without risk by messenger?"

The heavy bandit withdrew, rattling orders. Two scowling *ladrones* jerked Don Feliz, protesting, from the coach, searched him. They went over the carriage, missing nothing. And their report bore Don Feliz out.

They could find nothing but the modest sum carried by Don Feliz, which they appropriated. They laid no hand on the girl.

Gordo Salgado, watching the friar while his men rifled Don Feliz' pockets, must have read what lay in the cassocked man's mind. For suddenly his pistol menaced Robusto and his reptilian stare was on Trinidad. "Come," he said, and there was a wild light in his eyes. "We wait for you, señorita."

"By the five body wounds," cried Robusto. "What would you have with her, son of a coyote?" His hand poised before the vent in his cassock and he all but gave away his secret in his sudden rage. The bandit only cocked his pistol, and the friar knew it was suicide to oppose him.

"She shall not be harmed," said Gordo Salgado, "unless her father fails to get the ten thousand *pesos de oro* he has tricked me out of. Friar, you are a fair man; I depend upon you to convince Don Feliz it is better to lose money than the girl. Come, my beautiful chicken. We go for a ride."

Robusto and Don Feliz watched the waddling *bandido* boost the pallid, frightened girl into a saddle, neither daring take a step to help her. As the renegades rose to their saddles, Don Feliz took quick steps toward them. "In the name of God," he cried. "You ask for this money, and of course you shall have it. But where? How. . . ?"

"Tomorrow afternoon"—already the bandits were moving away—"at the Caves of the Owls, in the Santiagos. And come alone, my rooster, if you wish to see your daughter still alive!"

A quick roar of hoofs, dust columning high, and they were gone, swerving off the road and into the brush-choked entrance of a small arroyo debouching into El Paso de los Coyotes. And a harsh laugh drifting back: "Ten thousand *pesos de oro*, Don Feliz. Don't forget. If it is less—her blood be on your head!"

For a few moments Maytorena, Robusto and the driver listened for the last faint whisper of the bandits' going, as if loath to give up even that frail contact with the helpless girl. Then, with all sounds melted in the distance, Don Feliz sighed, tried pitifully to smile at Robusto.

"I am sorry, padre, that I can take you no further. I turn about, to Los Angeles, to rouse the sleeping law. If it's the last thing I do, I shall destroy that *puerco*. Caves of the Owls, eh?" His lips curled and his eyes flashed. "One of them shall be his sepulchre."

"And another, that of your daughter," snapped Robusto. "No, Don Feliz, I cannot let you do this wicked thing. Your first thought must be of Trinidad. Get into the coach. We will go to your *casa*. And while we ride, we shall talk. A friendly visit, no?"

"Talk—bah!" the ranchero spat. "I know what the talk shall be. Talk of prayers for her deliverance. Talk of money for candles. Talk, talk, talk! You *frailes* are all the same."

Robusto was smiling coldly as he pushed the distraught *haciendado* into the carriage and signed the driver toward Rancho Triunfo.

CHAPTER TWO

Trail of a Word

THERE was mighty little talk in that coach, on the road to Rancho Triunfo. Over and over, Don Feliz sighed: "And to think that my last words to her were unhappy ones. What a fool I've been!"

"That reflection," added Robusto, sagely, "is at least one good that has sprung from this evil. The sin is in remaining a fool."

"If only a man could recall the past and live it over," mourned the ranchero. "How different we would order it."

"You mean you would allow her to marry her lover, Diego Trevino?" In Robusto's voice was the ghost of a chuckle. "Had you allowed that, Don Feliz, you would not have taken her to see the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart; you would not have withdrawn money for a dowry for the dapper, unambitious Mateo Cansino. In other words, you would not have seen that bold Gordo Salgado; nor would *he* have seen the beautiful Trinidad."

"Don't talk like a fool!" snapped the *ranchero*, and turned his face out the window.

Silence rode with them for a couple miles, then Don Feliz spun about to face the apparently drowsing friar.

"You talk loose about allowing Trinidad to marry Trevino. Most certainly not! I told no one about withdrawing this money, nobody but Trinidad. And she, delighting in disobedience, told Trevino everything. It is plain she must have told him this. He, the scoundrel, is doubtless in league with Salgado. What a fool I was to let you talk me into returning to the rancho. I must have Trevino seized and punished at once!"

"Only to have the law laugh at you," counseled Robusto, "and release him for lack of evidence. Not to mention what Gordo might do to Trinidad." And when the ranchero groaned and buried his face in his hands: "You must do nothing of the sort. There is a better way."

"What?" Don Feliz lifted his head.

"Tomorrow, at five in the evening, you must appear at the Caves of the Owls, with ten thousand *pesos de oro*. . . ."

"You are crazy, impractical, trying to confuse me!" Don Feliz flew into a tantrum. "I will not listen to you. If I take the money, what is to prevent Gordo from seizing me and holding me for all I'm worth in this world? No, I shall not do it. I shall call upon the *jerif!* I shall call out the soldiers! I—"

"Because your daughter's life hangs in the balance; because you love her and would spare her the slightest hurt, you must listen to me!" declared the friar.

And he started talking as he had never talked before. . . .

In another hour they were at the rich Rancho Triunfo. Even as they wheeled in through the great iron gates, Robusto wrung from Don Feliz the grudging con-

And there was a strong motive—Trinidad. . . .

sent to follow his plan—which was really no plan at all—just a hope, and a mad, reckless gamble.

The coach drew to a stop, the driver alighting and opening the door for the pair inside. A servant came from inside, a look of contemptuous toleration on his face. "That man, *patrón,* he is here again. Before *El Señor Dios,* I tried to put him out, but . . ."

Out of the patio came striding a raw-boned young giant, with snapping blue eyes focused not on Don Feliz or Robusto, but upon the windows of the coach. Dressed as a *charro,* his clothes showed hard wear.

He carried a wide sombrero in his hand and his wild blond hair, unusual in a *Californiano,* whipped in the evening breeze. Not finding what he sought, he turned a tight face to the *ranchero.*

"She told me you were putting her in a convent, señor. I believed at the last moment you would repent. If you have left her there, I warn you, I shall enter over the walls and take her away. Where is she?"

Don Feliz and handsome Diego Trevino stared at one another with all the truculence of men who have reared the banners of their pride and refuse to lower them. The ranchero, finding words difficult to spill over the dam of his bafflement and rage, fumed and spluttered.

Finally, he ground out: "You will find her in the hands of your master, Gordo Salgado. This you have done to her. I hope you are satisfied, you—you *bribón!*" His finger leveled toward the gate. "Get off my *rancho.* I never want to see your face again. If I had ten daughters, none would marry such a wild, reckless and penniless cow-herd. Get off!"

Don Feliz turned, storming into the *casa.* As he crossed the threshold, Robusto shouted after him: "I shall depend upon you, Don Feliz." Then he was hurrying after the angered young Trevino, who had patently left his horse outside and come over the wall.

With his cassock slapping his sturdy calves, as he almost ran to overtake Diego, Robusto pondered this new thought. Could it be possible that Diego was in some manner teamed up with Gordo! Stranger connections had been made in the wild Californias. Diego was of the stuff that Gordo's band was made—wild, daring, adventure-loving. And there was a strong motive—Trinidad.

Robusto caught the striding youth near the gate, sank steel fingers into the wiry arm. "For an eager lover, Diego," he said, not unkindly, "you show little interest in the news Don Feliz bore you. Or was it news?"

Diego shook off his grip. "If I paid attention to the ravings of that man," he said fiercely, "I'd have gone loco long ago, and probably killed him. Such drivel! 'Find Trinidad in the hands of my master, Gordo Salgado!' My master is Don Maurilio Barcenas, and everybody knows it. If Maytorena expects to keep me out of that convent by such lies, he's the crazy one."

"She is not in the convent, my son. She is, as Don Feliz told you, in the hands of a ruthless bandit, whose only pleasure is in killing and pillaging. Pray God that he will keep his word not to harm Trinidad if we bring him the ten thousand *pesos de oro!*"

Still the bitter youth would not believe but that this was a trick to cheat him of

the bride he coveted. So Robusto, pausing where they found the vaquero's horse tied, began at the moment he was picked up by Don Feliz and told everything which had happened.

"It seems," he finished, "that Don Feliz told only Trinidad this money would be withdrawn. He believes that she in turn told you. You see how he got the idea you were working for Gordo."

Diego saw and was nonplussed. "It is not so," he protested. "I do not even know Gordo by sight, let alone well enough to speak to. It is true that Trinidad told me of her father drawing money to secure her marriage contract with the Cansinos. But . . ." He fell silent, his eyes filling with doubt.

"You told nobody, my son?"

Diego blinked, his fire damped. "Only one, Padre. My compañero in the herding, Rafael Brazos. We are like brothers, baring our hearts each to the other. Of all men, I would trust Rafael farthest not to betray my confidence."

"Wilfully, perhaps he might not," mused the friar, "but actually he must in some manner have done so. At least he, in his turn, must have told somebody. We must find who that somebody is, Diego, to learn the one from whom Gordo gets his information."

Diego's dark eyes blazed. "To learn where this Gordo is, you mean!" he rumbled. "Learning that, I will kill the overfed pig. Come, my horse will carry double. We go to see Rafael. If he has talked, I'll wring his neck like I would a *polla!*"

AT SUNDOWN, Robusto had Diego halt at a wayside *posada* to rest and grain the pony while they enjoyed crisp tortillas, *frijoles con chile* and especially fine *huevos al rancho,* all washed down with mellow red wine from the hills of the Muscubiabe.

Robusto was in rare good humor. He twitted the blushing *doncellita* who waited upon them. He flattered the smiling *posadero.* He took time to praise each dish, upon tasting it. He ate hugely, joking, laughing and, over a last glass of wine, roared out a verse of a song and executed a few steps of La Zorrita, light and graceful as a *bailarin.*

Everyone in the place roared him a *"Viva".* But Diego did not so much as smile. His heart was heavy and he was past cheering. He seemed glad to leave when Robusto had paid and remained silent as they took up their journey to the herder's adobe, in an arm of the valley reaching into the mouth of Canyon Cascaron.

The moon was up and no light shone from the windows of the herder's house when the two men reached it. When they had dismounted, Robusto said: "I'll corral the horse, Diego, and remain outside while you talk to Rafael. But speak softly and wrap it up prettily, for I would as soon eat meat before mass as to break the friendship of two saddle-brothers."

Diego muttered acquiescence, and entered the darkened cabin. When the light came on, the friar had his nose to the pane, unwilling to miss anything. He saw the aroused Diego jerk his sleeping friend from the cornhusk *cama.*

"Listen well to me, my crowing rooster," he hissed at the sleep-drugged and stupid Rafael. "When we talk together, it has been understood that the matters ended there. Now I find that you have talked, you howling coyote. Told my innermost secrets so that now they belong to that low *renegado,* Gordo Salgado. Do you know the dog? Speak! Are you tied up with him?"

The name shook all sleep from Rafael. Half angrily, half pityingly, he tore from Diego's grasp. "You're drunk!" he said.

Diego slapped him, forehand and back, across the cheeks. It roused a devil in Rafael and for an instant, Robusto thought he would fly at Diego's throat. Then, with admirable mastery of temper, he shrugged, dropped to the bed. "You're serious," he said. "Tell me what I have done."

Diego told him, demanding to know who Rafael had talked with, whom he had enlightened as to the coming Maytorena dowry.

For a vibrant moment, Rafael thought. Then: "Nobody," he announced.

Diego eyed him sourly. "Don't lie to me, Rafael."

"Nobody but my own father whom, as

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you well know, I visited night before last. My father would repeat nothing I told him in confidence."

"Ah-h-h." Diego's dark eyes lighted. "Then, Rafael, your father is a *maldito,* a low person working with that coyote devil, Gordo Salgado."

"That is a lie. You have no right. . . ." Furiously he hurled himself across the bed, where his belt with knife and gun hung from a peg in the adobe wall. Diego leaped upon him, and in an instant they were rolling, cursing, pummeling one another. And Robusto darted into the house, caught each of them by the collar, tore them apart.

"Is this friendship, to grovel like the serpents and snarl like the wolves? For shame!" He shoved them toward opposite corners of the room. "Now, Rafael, who is your father? And where can he be found?"

They sat down and Rafael, having been given the story of what had transpired, forgave his friend and gave the friar the information desired. Pedro Brazos, Rafael's sire, lived a lonely life, grazing his flocks on the tiny mesas overlooking Santiago Canyon. His *casita* was at the spring called Ojos Muerdagos, at the place of the Mistletoe, on the Mesa of the Big Oaks.

"Bueno!" smiled Robusto, reassuringly. "Such a man could not well be playing Gordo Salgado's conscienceless game. In the morning, we will ride up there and trace down the man he might have spoken to about the ten thousand *pesos de oro.* Now let us go to sleep."

It satisfied them. The two youths stretched out, side by side on the bed, sighed once and were asleep. Robusto then arose like a ghost and noiselessly quit the house. If what he thought was true, he didn't want Rafael around to witness truth at its worst. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Forbidden Land

A COPPERY quarter moon hung low in the west, mocking the brilliance of the rising morning star. The Mesa of the Big Oaks was rocky, and the horse made quite a clatter coming up the trail, so Robusto dismounted at the top, led the animal well back into the trees, loosened the saddle and rigged the rope for a picket.

A queer, cold little smile played about the friar's lips as he doffed his cassock and girdle. From the pockets of that wide inner belt which gave him the appearance of being well fattened about the middle, instead of hard as granite, he took pistols and knife, a battered old hat. Then he rolled the belt in the cassock and, as long had been his habit, placed them in the crotch of a tree.

He emerged from the shade of the oaks and into a lighter area of willow, arrow-weed and wild grape. A horse snorted immediately before him, and then he saw them—two saddled animals tied to a post. Horses meant men; men meant trouble; trouble could mean death.

"Dios es grande," murmured Robusto, piously. "Our sheepherder has company."

"Quien es?" A call, sharp and rife with suspicion, came flinging from the gloom. A shadow stirred. "Who's that?"

"Friend," answered Robusto, and added for good measure: "With money."

"Stand where you are!" The shadow grew into the black bulk of a man, moving deliberately toward him, his pistol outthrust before him.

A voice called: "What's the matter, Julio?"

"An hombre here who says he's brought the money. Back me up, boys. This has a bad smell."

Robusto grimaced, listening to the snapping of twigs as they came swiftly, the light running along their gun-barrels. The one called Julio came closer, measuring each step in the darkness.

"Who are you?" And when Robusto's answer wasn't instantly forthcoming, he paused. "Light a match and let me look at you. I don't like the smell of this."

That the friar couldn't venture. The man had paused a body length from him. It was not too far. Robusto leaped, with that strange, rubbery litheness characteristic of him. His swinging left hand batted the flaming gun down, sent its load harmlessly winging through low underbrush.

But this Julio suddenly leaped at the friar, his knife glinting. Robusto shot him

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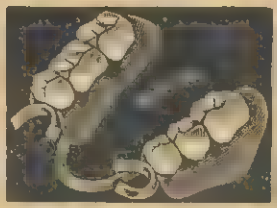

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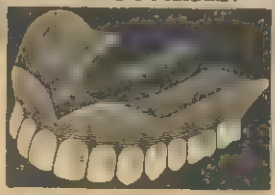

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then, and went to the ground as the fellow died.

Oaths crackled from the oaks. Bullets humming over Robusto. Sheep bleated on the hillside amid the savage clamor of the sheep dogs.

The two from the house, believing their nocturnal enemy destroyed, came legging toward him. Robusto fired and one went down, crumpling in a heap. Something slapped Robusto's forehead. . . .

The world whirled dizzily for Robusto. Then his vision cleared and he saw the third man had not yet reached him. Robusto tilted his pistol muzzle and fired. Struck mortally, the third man reeled, threw his hands high and sprawled.

A deathly silence fell over the spot. It was as if the sheep and the dogs too realized that death had struck close. Robusto climbed up, dabbing at his furrowed forehead with his sleeve.

Dawn came up out of the east and the friar looked at his tally. Two were of the stripe that had stopped Don Feliz' coach, probably two of the band. The third one was older, more ragged, but none the less a creature of evil as he lay there with sightless eyes upturned to the dawn sky.

Robusto sighed. "As I feared," he murmured. "Slaves of the devil, all of them. I sorrow only for the boy, Rafael."

In the light of the rising sun, Robusto cut hairs from his horse's tail and mane, bound them skillfully with strong thread from a pocket of his girdle, placed it over his shaven pate and crammed the battered hat down over the tie. Long coarse black hair straggled down over his face and shoulders in unkempt cascades.

He looked into a small pocket mirror, grinned his satisfaction and went down to the sheepherder's *casita*.

The place was a mess. Only a dirt-floor hovel of stepped flag rock, roofed with thatch, its ceiling was festooned with spider webs heavy with soot. Around the ash-choked firehole were pottery plates soiled with mutton fat and bones.

Under the sewn fleeces spread upon the ground in one corner, Robusto found a long-barreled *escopeta* powder flask and bullet pouch. And evidence of earth recently disturbed. With a knife he opened up the cache, turning out a sheepskin bag

well filled with silver pesos, American gold pieces and treasury notes—several thousand dollars, from the look of it. This bag Robusto took outside and hid away in the brush.

"Half to Rafael, the dutiful son and heir," he decided. "And half to saintly Father Manuel, at the mission, to carry on his endless charities. Not a bad legacy for a sinful old *borrachón*. And now, Robusto, we shall see what the sheep will do for their new Indian herder."

"Sheep?" sneered the more skeptical side of his nature. "If the sheep do not stampede at sight of so loathsome an Indio, and dash themselves to pieces over the bluffs that guard these mesas, the dogs will probably make a feast of you. Still, if you can contrive to get the bleating creatures down into the valley and throw them in with the mission flock, it will be a feather in your cap. More than ever, you will be Father Manuel's fair-haired boy."

"You do not know Father Manuel," argued the friar's better side. "Stolen sheep he would not accept for any purpose. Besides, I am not taking this flock to the valley. Quite the opposite direction, in fact—to the brink of the mesa opposite the Caves of the Owls."

"Dios forbid! There Gordo Salgado will be watching for Feliz Maytorena. He will be sure to see you. Maybe he and his men have heard the shooting, which carries a long way in these cañons, Robusto. Suppose they are coming now? What will you tell them when they get here and ask who you are?"

The friar laughed. "I am Otsubor, the last of the ill-fated Cucomogna tribe—the name being only my own spelled backward, and no lie for that reason. Come now, let us see what kind of herders we make."

THE sheep lay on the rocky hillside, a white blot in the early sunlight. The dogs, guarding them, lifted their hackles at Robusto's approach, snarling and circling.

After Robusto rewarded them with bones from the house, it was no trick to move the flock along the brow of the hill and keep them going, past one mesa after

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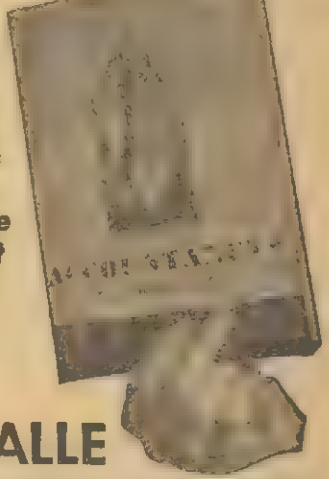

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another, until the pocked limestone steep was directly across the deep canyon containing the Caves of the Owls.

Robusto sprawled at the edge of the drop and watched the face of the opposite canyon wall, and the mouths of the hundred big and little caves, eroded by wind and rain.

A pair of eared owls, daring the bright sunlight, soared, circled and swooped toward the mouth of a small cave, always sheering off without entering. And Robusto smiled a cold, thin smile. He had a pretty good idea why those birds were afraid to enter their nesting place.

Then Robusto saw the lone horseman coming across the mesa beyond the canyon. Coming from the northeast, which would preclude its being Don Feliz. Yet it was time the don of Rancho Triunfo was coming, if indeed he was coming at all.

Another lone rider appeared down there, and this time there could be no doubt as to its being Don Feliz. The *ranchero* paused, looking up at the caves. And at that moment the rider—one Robusto could not recognize—reined in at the brink and looked down. Moments later, he had dropped down the narrow, winding trail to face the *ranchero*. Words came drifting up to the friar:

"You have brought the money, señor?"

"I have brought it. My daughter?"

"I shall take you to her. Come."

Don Feliz demurred. "I like it not. Here I was to bring the money and Trinidad was to be returned to me. Now you say you will take me to her. How do I know. . . ?"

"You know nothing, señor, except what you are told. You will do well to obey. Follow me if you want to see your daughter alive." He turned his horse about, took his way up the canyon floor. Don Feliz followed, looking as if he smelled the treachery of these faithless *bandidos*.

For the moment, Robusto didn't watch them go. A movement in that small cave where the pair of outraged owls swooped and swerved, caught his eye. Two faces appeared at the opening, staring after the two riders in the canyon. The faces of the two *vaquero* companions—Diego Trevino and Rafel Brazos!

Diego's voice struck across to the alert

friar. "Watch where they go, Rafael, while I get the horses." And he emerged.

Glancing at the distance Don Feliz and his guide had drawn away, Robusto chanced a crisp order. "Get back in that cave, Trevino," he barked, "if you do not want to die!"

Diego's head swiveled and he stared, frozen. But Robusto was too well hidden. With a crestfallen air, Diego turned, entered the cave. And Robusto slid from his covert, coyotelike, until he was out of sight of the pair in the cave. Then he hurried along the chain of mesas, watching the route taken by the emissary of Gordo Salgado.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Way of Friar Robusto

THE sun had gone down and the high colors in the western sky were paling when Robusto, taking advantage of every cover, came to the place where the two horsemen had vanished.

Silent as a snake, Robusto followed this well-beaten trail until he could look into the great vent in the cliff. It was a dozen feet across and its dingy interior big enough to hold man and beast.

Robusto keened the air for danger, sensed nothing more imminent than the faint murmur of voices, and slipped inside. Soon he came to a fork in this deep fissure. From the right-hand branch came the snorting of ponies. From the left came the sudden outburst of men's laughter, toward which the friar made his way.

At a bend in the fissure, light flickered and Robusto halted.

A fire burned briskly, the smoke being drawn swiftly upward to the pale sliver of sky above. Beside that blaze, his face black as a cloud, his arm about his daughter, stood Don Feliz. The girl clung to him as if never to let him go, keeping her face buried against his coat. Across from them stood Gordo Salgado, his great bulk never more apparent, his full belly shaking with mirth. Behind him stood four of his men.

"What a trusting fellow you are, Maytorena," chortled the bandit. "I told you I would turn over your girl for the gold.

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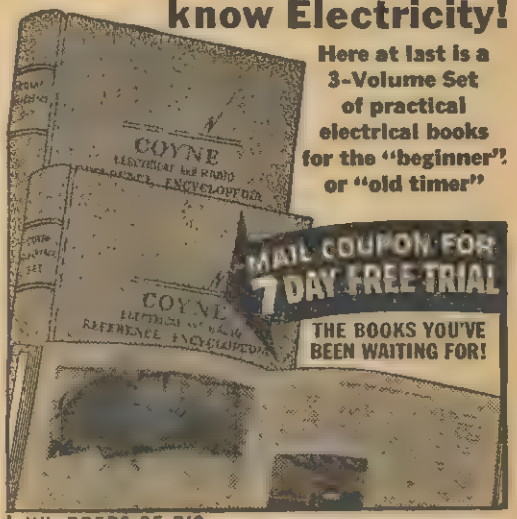

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I've kept my word. But I said nothing about letting *you* go! Soon—maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, whenever we tire of looking at the señorita's beautiful face—we shall send her home to raise the one hundred thousand *pesos de oro* for *your* ransom!"

"*Hundred* thousand?" Don Feliz moaned. "I have no such sum!"

Gordo chuckled. "What a pity that a man with your vast grant, your great herds and boundless credit should put a few *pesos de oro* before his own life. In our humble way, Don Feliz, we will try to make you comfortable. But we enjoy none of the luxuries of you *ricos* and I doubt not you will become very homesick before long. Perhaps homesick enough to change your mind. *Dios sabe.*"

When the girl sobbed anew, the distraught ranchero tried to comfort her and to damn his captors in the same breath.

Gordo's smile thinned and he shook a warning finger. "You try my patience, señor. I will leave you with the señorita before I am tempted to teach you manners. Two of my men were to be here to stand guard over you. They are wine-bibbers and I ride to punish them. Tito, you and Angel will stand guard at the entrance and kill anyone who would escape. And now, Don Feliz, señorita, we bid you *buenas noches. Salud y buen sueño.*"

Robusto, moving swiftly against discovery, backed along the floor of the slot, aiming to lose himself among the horses in the other branch. Behind him was a sound that placed cold fingers around his heart—the scrape of a *huarache* on the bare rock.

One man had unsaddled and stalled Don Feliz's pony, and had probably saddled mounts for Gordo and those who would accompany him to Pedro Brazos' hovel. Robusto's life hung on a slender thread, and he knew it. He went to the earth like a man shot, and a flung knife buzzed over him, clattering on the rocks beyond.

The ring of the blade commanded instant cessation of talk at the fire. Robusto, on hands and knees, spun to face this new threat. His fingers closed around a small rock.

Dim against the faint glow, striking in from the entrance, he saw the knife wield-

er, a silhouetted target. His arm curled back, straightened. The rock sped out, fair and true, spatting against the man's forehead, dropping him without a moan.

But now from Gordo came a mandatory: "Go see what that was!" And there was an instant answering of bootsteps.

Robusto didn't pause. He leaped forward, caught up the unconscious bandit and ran with him to the confluence of the two branches of the fissure. He had whisked him around the corner and into the gloom of the hidden stable before the bandits were out of the room-like enlargement where the fire blazed.

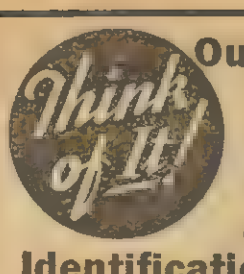
Having laid his victim down, Robusto drew one of his guns, fired a quick shot toward the entrance. In a shrill, hysterical voice, he yelled: *"Valgame Dios!* Come quickly; we are attacked! They come, with guns!"

It brought instant action. Rough-edged orders from Gordo to break out their long guns, and a warning to the prisoners that any attempt to escape would earn them only death. Then they were hammering toward the entrance, racing past the place where Robusto stood. One. . . . Three, Four! And Gordo, waddled like an overfed gander, bringing up the rear.

Robusto could have killed him and might have done so had he known what he soon was to learn. But what he wanted now was to get them outside, join Don Feliz and Trinidad, and look for some safe hiding place farther along the slot, from which they might emerge at first sign of bandit relaxation. Most of all, he wanted the Maytorenas to know that they they were not entirely abandoned.

Now Robusto ducked out and hurried toward the fire, only to pause and fling about as firing burst out beyond the entrance. The *spang* of bullets ricocheted off the rocks amid the bellowing of *escopetas.*

FILLED with doubt, Robusto ran back to the fire where Don Feliz and his daughter still stood clinging to one another, their faces showing a total abandonment of hope. They shrunk from him, and Robusto couldn't blame them. For in all truth, he looked like a greasy, villainous Indio, with that horsetail wig blowing wildly about his face.



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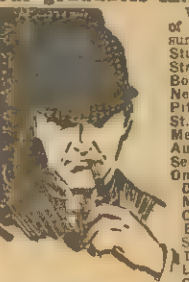

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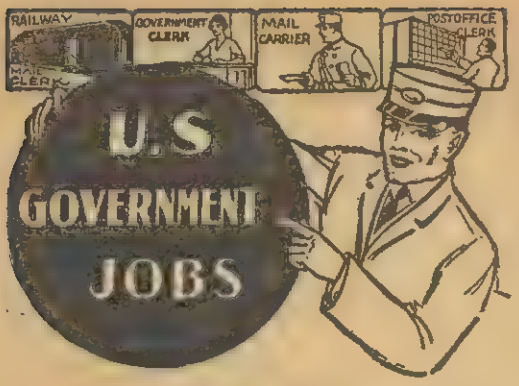

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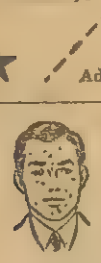

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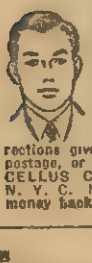

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"Come," he said, hoarsely, "and be silent. I am a friend!"

It rallied them. Like drowning people clutching at straws, they swallowed their fear, swung wide around him and hurried down the darkening corridor.

At the junction of the twin branches, he halted the Maytorenas. "Get back in there, find a hiding place and be silent until you are sure the *bandidos* are beaten." He pressed a pistol into the hand of Don Feliz. "If the need arises, do not hesitate to use this."

He waited only to see them stumbling deeper into the hay of the improvised stables, then he turned and ran toward the faint glow of twilight at the entrance. He found nobody blocking the way. The firing, still undiminished, came from beyond the deep clump of chamisa brush.

Robusto, at a loss to explain the cause of the war he himself had started by a false cry, gripped his pistol and began a cautious advance along the trail at the foot of the cliff. Daylight was failing fast. If night didn't come too soon, and if he played a cautious game, he might permanently discourage Gordo and his ladrones from reëntering their hideaway.

There were about thirty steps from the mouth of the fissure to where the brush fell away on the flat talus below the cliff. Robusto had covered perhaps two thirds of this when one of the bandits came hurtling around the point of brush, his smoking gun in his left hand, his right dabbing his sash against a bleeding cut on his cheek. At sight of Robusto, he halted, gaped, dropped the sash and spun about.

"*Dios!*" he screamed. "Already the *demonios* are behind us. We are lost!"

The bandit raced from cover, onto the talus. There a bullet struck him, but the panic he had engendered lived after him.

From somewhere in that brush thicket, Gordo Salgado bawled: "We cannot reach them. Into the *cueva* for the horses! If the dogs want battle, they shall have it. Alfonso must have gone *loco;* they cannot be behind us!"

They came with a rush, bounding along the lower edge of the thicket and swinging around the point of brush even as the ill-fated Alfonso had done. One reeled and

plunged downward beside Alfonso and the gun echoes, from some remote point, were echoed by Robusto's shot as he dropped another bandit.

The firing continued from some remote vantage, and still the bullets wailed off the rocks. Those shots could only be at Gordo Salgado, for whom Robusto had waited. Convinced that the bandit leader, alone now, had decided against reëntering the fissure, Robusto darted to the point of brush.

A moment later he made out Gordo, darting into a thicket, far below, leaping with a surprising alacrity for one so heavy. With no other thought than to overtake that cruel raider, Robusto leaped into the open, running down that slope.

And now those far guns were trained upon him. Bullets droned about him, crying for his life. For the moment he had forgotten his appearance, forgotten that those hidden allies must think he was just another of the bandits.

He turned his head, while at full run, held up his hand. It did no good. Several hundred feet away he saw two men standing, shooting at him. There was no mistaking those meddlesome youngsters, Diego Trevino and Rafael Brazos.

There were many close calls for Robusto in that gauntlet he ran. Yet his luck held firm and he was yet untouched when he gained the brushy cover which had swallowed the bandit chieftain before him. Ahead of him, Robusto could see the brush tops waving. But, because of the noise he was making, he could not hear Gordo's progress. And, for the same reason, knew the bandit could not hear him.

As he struggled against the brush, Robusto saw the slope of the opposite hillside draw in, and he knew he was close to the bottom. Also that Gordo must have reached the narrow waterway already and could now hear him—Robusto—coming. It was a moment to pause and consider ways and means of approaching a bayed and desperate man. Instead, Robusto chose the speedier, more reckless way, making one swift bull-like rush through the last of the brush and debouching upon the sandy bottom of the arroyo. And he was suddenly face to face with Gordo Salgado.

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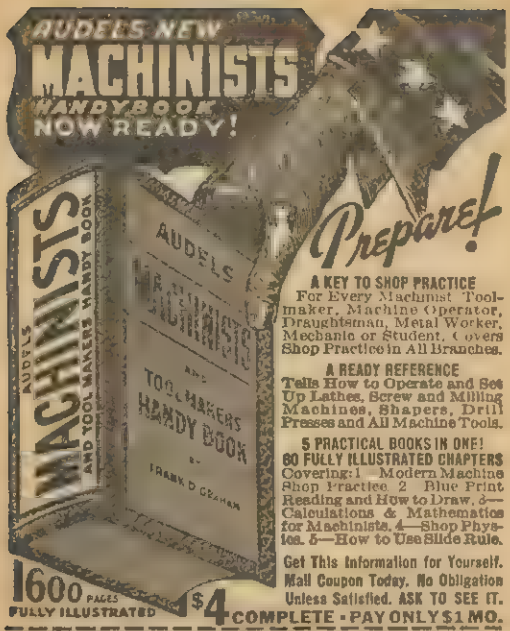
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The *bandido* had a pistol in his hand and he was planted in the small trickle of water in the stream, as if to ease the strain he had placed on his feet. He stared at Robusto with the narrowed eyes of one who is not certain if he faces friend or foe.

With his cocked gun bearing directly on Robusto's middle, he croaked: "Who are you, hombre?"

Robusto relaxed, put away his gun. "I am Rairf Otsubor," he said. "The last of the Cucomognas. What is all the shooting about?"

Gordo sighed, dropped his guard. "An *Indio,*" he said, relieved. "Two murderous devils lie on yonder point, killing us honest vaqueros. But for why?" He shrugged. "Who knows? Bad men they are. You can earn a hundred pesos if you will slip up behind them and shoot them down while I hold their attention here."

"A hundred pesos," murmured Robusto. "Lots of money! How can you afford so much, instead of running far away from them and maybe telling the *jerif?*"

A crafty look came into the fat outlaw's eyes. "I will tell you, *Indio,*" he said. "Those two come for a man and a girl, held by me in a cave near here. The girl I will keep to indulge my fancy. The man I will release for one hundred thousand pesos. Or maybe I will wring a paper out of him, kill him and live in his rich estate, in luxury. A hundred pesos? That is nothing. I will pay you a thousand pesos to kill those two men—*five* thousand! Will you do it, *Indio?*"

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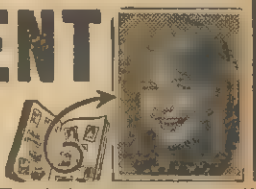

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Very softly, Robusto said: "You would not have told these things to a man you intended to spare, señor. A dog with a full gut will not lay his nose to the trail. And neither need a man pay a due-bill to one who is dead."

Gordo flushed. "What do you mean? Are you trying to—?"

Robusto swept off his hat and crude wig, stood there smiling, cold and thin. The bandit stared a moment and then, with a croaked: "The damned mendicant!" he tried to bring his weapon to bear upon Robusto.

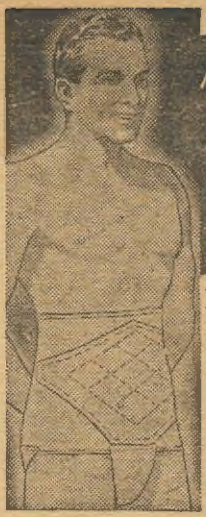
It is doubtful if he saw the friar palm his pistol. In full knowledge he must act quickly or die, Robusto found swiftness and strength. His brain and muscles coordinated to achieve an explosion of effort that got his shot away before the fat-laden bandit could line his pistol. His bullet struck Gordo, smashing him back on his heels. He took three backward steps and sat down, ludicrously.

For one moment, Gordo tried to get his pistol lined on Robusto. Failing that, he dropped the weapon. His lips moved. "They always said," Robusto heard him whisper, "my impiety would bring me to no good end. You—you shoot well—for a friar!"

He toppled over then, his fat form damming a little pool behind it. Robusto walked to him, murmuring the prayer for an errant soul. He picked up the pistol that Gordo would not be needing, stuck it into his waistband. For a short minute, he listened to the call of Diego, up the hillside: "Trinidad. Can you hear me, Trinidad?"

And the girl answered, her voice growing louder as she emerged from the great fissure. She came to her lover's arms and their voices were stilled, and Robusto smiled and took his way down the creek, walking swiftly. . . .

WHEN visitors hailed the shepherd's hovel at Ojos Muerdagos, at the Place of the Mistletoe, it was Friar Robusto who answered, emerging from the house and welcoming them with outstretched arms.



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Friar Robusto was arrayed in tattered brown robe and worn sandals, with a warm smile crinkling his straight lips and nothing to show for his adventure save a bullet burn along his forehead. "Welcome, my children."

Diego and Trinidad came first, laughing with the joy of love and life, their arms about one another. Behind them came Don Feliz.

"Padre!" Diego's cry was joyful. "Bless us! Trinidad and I are to be married as soon as the bans can be published, and with the don's full consent. We are all overjoyed."

"It is good to admit being wrong, when it is proven," smiled Don Feliz. "I was wrong about this boy. He is possessed

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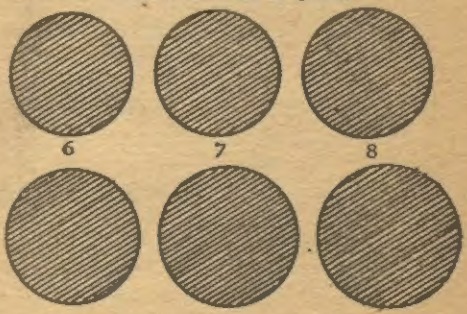

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of a keen brain and a fighting heart. That *malo hombre,* Gordo Salgado, took the money I brought and laughed at me. But Diego and his friend Rafael attacked the *bandidos,* killed them and rescued us. For which I shall handsomely reward them both. It was a brave and masterful plan Diego had, Padre. Ah, do not think I am ungrateful for your plan to help me, but when it comes to fighting, these youngsters have us beat!"

He paused for breath and Rafael, who had stuck his head into the house, turned about, puzzled. "I—I wonder where my father can be?"

Robusto went to him, laid a hand gently on his shoulder. "Your father is dead, Rafael. He fell, defending his poor home and meagre wealth against the inroads of men who came in the night. His large flock is now yours. And the bag of gold under his bed.

For a moment Rafael's face contorted with a mixture of grief and rage. "We have paid the *diablos* who did it," he said, grimly. "Even to their leader, Gordo Salgado, who lies dead in yonder canyon, with our bullets through him. I hope you are satisfied now that my father had no traffic with those bad men."

"I am satisfied," nodded Robusto, his eyes sparkling.

"A bad time we all had," said Don Feliz, moodily. "But all is ending well. You are invited to the fiesta, Padre, at Rancho Triunfo, in honor of my daughter's approaching wedding. And I shall present you with a thousand *pesos de oro,* to be expended at Mission San Gabriel, as Father Manuel directs."

"Father Manuel will be very happy," said Robusto, and he was fingering an added girth, due to distended pockets in his girdle. For there he had the American paper money from Pedro Brazos' cache, and the ten thousand peso ransom, taken from the dead body of Gordo Salgado. "Yes, there are so many good things Father Manuel can do with the money."

THE END

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